Alcune informazioni sul virus HPV: informazioni brevi per le utenti

Updated: October 2024

Some information on Human Papillomavirus (HPV): concise information for patients

OSSERVATORIO NAZIONALE SCREENING

GISCi
Gruppo Italiano Screening del Cervicocarcinoma

Inglese
English

This information is provided in particular for women offered an HPV test as part of the cervical cancer preventative screening programmes.

1. What is HPV?

◆ HPV (Human Papillomavirus) is a virus responsible for a very common infection, which most people will get at least once in their lives.

2. What does this infection do?

◆ Usually, it does not cause any physiological changes and clears up by itself.

◆ Occasionally, however, it can lead to cervical lesions. Most of these lesions will, in turn, heal by themselves; some, however, if not treated, can slowly turn cancerous.

◆ It takes a long time for these lesions to turn into tumours, however, and a very small percentage of women who get an HPV infection will actually develop cervical cancer.

3. How long does an HPV infection last?

◆ The great majority of these infections clear up spontaneously, 50% over the course of the first year and 80% within two years.

◆ When the infection disappears, this means that the risk is also no longer present.

4. How do you catch it?

◆ HPV is sexually transmitted, although it does not necessarily require full penetrative intercourse with ejaculation in order to be passed on.

◆ In some cases, the infection can be transmitted by one partner to the other many years after they initially caught it.

◆ Having this infection may therefore have nothing to do with your current partner.

5. How is it treated?

◆ There is currently no cure for this infection. It should be noted that antibiotics, vaginal suppositories and vaginal douching have proven to be ineffective.

◆ The most important thing, should an HPV test come back positive, is to identify any changes caused by the virus in good time – that is what we are looking for with the Pap smear test.

◆ Taking part in the screening program is therefore the most effective thing that women can do to protect themselves.

6. Can it be prevented?

◆ HPV is very difficult to prevent: it is a very common infection, particularly amongst young people, and even condoms do not offer 100% protection.

◆ For the last few years, a vaccine has been available which protects against some strains of the virus which are responsible for the majority of cervical cancers.

7. What is the HPV test and how do you take it?

◆ The HPV test is a laboratory exam which looks for the virus, and it is performed on a sample taken in the same way as a Pap smear.

8. Why are HPV tests performed?

◆ The HPV test is taken for various reasons:

- As a screening test instead of the Pap test from the age of 30-35 upwards. In this case, if the HPV test is positive then the Pap smear test becomes a complementary exam known as a triage test because it selects the women who have changes at the cellular level and must undergo a colposcopy;
- As a triage test to select the women for whom cell changes (known as ASC-US or LSIL) have been found in the Pap test who must undergo a colposcopy. In this case the HPV test is a complementary exam;
- To follow up on patients who have had a positive HPV or Pap smear followed by a negative colposcopy, or in whom mild lesions have been found;
- To follow up on patients who have had treatment for pre-cancerous cervical lesions.

9. What is a colposcopy?

◆ Colposcopy is an examination similar to a gynaecological exam: the gynaecologist uses an instrument known as a colposcope, which provides an illuminated and magnified view of the cervix.

◆ If the gynaecologist sees any physiological changes, they will perform a biopsy (a small tissue sample taken from the cervix).

◆ Colposcopy is a generally painless procedure. If a biopsy were necessary, you might feel slight discomfort, similar to an injection or other mild pain.

◆ Following a colposcopy, you may sometimes notice spotting which will usually clear up quickly.

10. What happens after a colposcopy?

◆ If your cervix is normal or only has mild lesions, you will not require any treatment and the gynaecologist will tell you what checks will be required in the future.

◆ If, on the other hand, the gynaecologist finds lesions requiring treatment, you will be referred by the screening program to a specialised centre where you will be able to undergo this treatment free of charge.

11. How can I get more information on HPV?

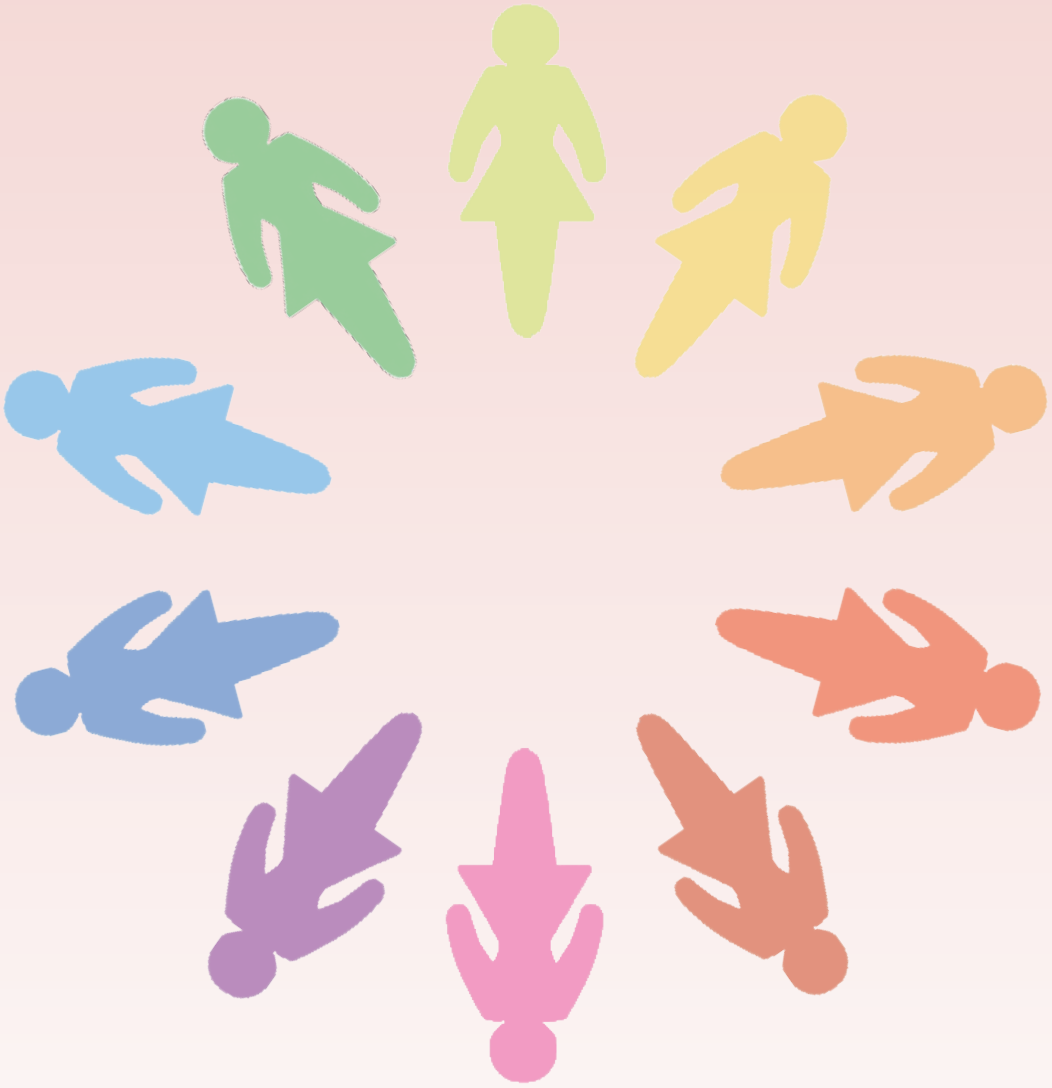
◆ Read *Altre informazioni sul virus HPV: informazioni approfondite per le utenti* (Further information on HPV: in-depth information for patients, available in Italian), available on the following websites: **www.osservatorionazionalescreening.it** and **www.gisci.it**

Working group

Anna Iossa e Francesca Maria Carozzi (Coordinatori), Angela Brachini, Cinzia Campari, Debora Canuti, Paola Capparucci, Francesca Maria Carozzi, Carmelina Di Pierro, Chiara Fedato, Grazia Grazzini, Anna Iossa, Gessica Martello, Cristina Nicolai, Antonella Pellegrini.

Special thanks to those who contributed to the realisation of this project:
Cloè Belliot, Lorena Baboçi, Magdalena Ciupercovici, Elise Merrill Chapin, Elena Dascaliuc, Ekaterina Egorchenkova, Anna Garasymiv, María Maestre Fernández, Wendy Martin, Eshraga Mohammed Abdalwahap, Meriem Moutiai, Julia Nico, Natascha Pleshca, Catalin Szabò, Cristofor Catalina Doina, Katrin Hoehn, Marco Casini.

Thanks to the 100 questions on HPV working group:
Debora Canuti, Francesca Maria Carozzi, Carla Cogo, Annarosa Del Mistro, Carmelina Di Pierro, Silvia Franceschi, Cristina Giambi, Paolo Giorgi Rossi, Anna Iossa, Tiziano Maggino, Gessica Martello, Maria Grazia Pascucci.



First edition **December 2018**

Second edition: **October 2024**

Editorial word:
Inferenze scarl, Milano

The translation from Italian to other languages was carried out by:
STUDIO TRE S.r.l., Reggio Emilia

Layout:
Inferenze scarl, Milano