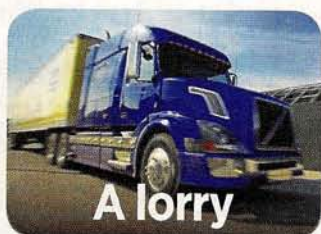


The big health question

So, do you think

HPV is:

a)



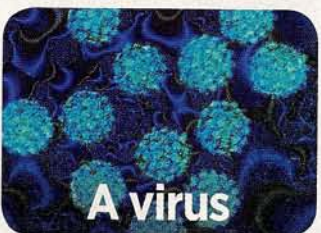
A lorry

b)



A music store

c)



A virus

Four in five of us will get HPV, yet it's is a virus that confuses the hell out of us. Here, we separate fact from fiction

The HPV vaccine regularly makes headlines, and you know it's linked to cervical cancer, but if, like us, you've struggled to get to grips with HPV, look no further. We've tracked down the best experts to find the truth...

TRUE *Most of us will catch it at some point*

HPV (human papillomavirus) is transmitted via genital contact. "Around 30% of the female population is HPV positive at any one time, and 80% of all women will contract strains 16 or 18 (the ones that are mostly likely to lead to cervical cancer) at some point," says Gabrielle Downey, consultant

gynaecologist at The Priory Hospital. Most of us catch HPV within one year of starting to have sex, but our immune system fights it off. Only 4–8% of people keep it for life because their bodies fail in this fight, explains Gabrielle. A typical woman will contract it seven times over her lifetime, only for her immune system to wage war with it and win. Hurrah! >

FALSE *Only teens can get the vaccine*

Nope, it's not just for teens: "It's definitely worth adult women getting vaccinated. Even if they've been exposed to HPV, it can reduce risk of developing cancer," says Dr Tom Brett, GP for Lloyds Pharmacy. "Lloyds Pharmacy offers women Cervarix or Gardasil vaccines." Gabrielle advises Gardasil because it protects against the genital-wart strain of HPV too.

FALSE *Good girls don't get it*

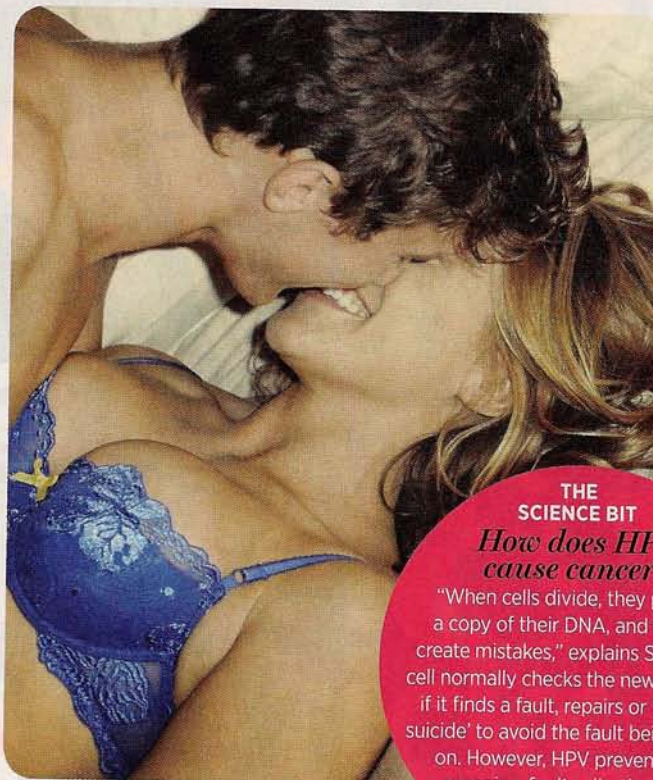
There's a myth that only girls who have wild sex with lots of partners get HPV. "That's nonsense, given that four in five of us will have it at some point," says Gabrielle. "You don't have to have sex to catch it. It can be transferred by any genital contact." Having sex just once could lead to an HPV infection even if you use a condom, although they greatly reduce the risk, says Dr Tom. "If you're infected with HPV, it does not necessarily mean you've had a large number of sexual partners. However, a large number of sexual partners will increase your risk of becoming infected, as will having sex from a young age."

TRUE *Smear tests will get better*

One in 18 of us has experienced abnormal smear test results. Mostly, you then have to wait six tense months to have another smear to check on the cells, to see if they've gone back to normal or not. "The NHS is planning to change the system," says Gabrielle. "If you have an abnormal smear, they'll test your smear result for HPV 16 and 18; you'll only have to go back if you tested positive for them."

TRUE *Smoking makes matters worse*

If you eat well, sleep lots, exercise and, most importantly, don't smoke, your body will be better at fighting off HPV. "Women who have pre-cancerous changes when they have a colposcopy (a closer look at the cervix) can find their cells go back to normal just by quitting smoking," says Professor Sean Kehoe, gynaecological cancer specialist for Wellbeing of Women.



THE SCIENCE BIT
How does HPV cause cancer?
"When cells divide, they produce a copy of their DNA, and this can create mistakes," explains Sean. "The cell normally checks the new DNA and, if it finds a fault, repairs or 'commits suicide' to avoid the fault being passed on. However, HPV prevents this, meaning faults slip through." Now you know...

FALSE *You should tell your sexual partner if you have it*

If you know that you're HPV positive, do you need to have The Chat? Unless you have the genital-wart strain of HPV, Sean doesn't think so. "It really is so widespread that it would be like saying you're a carrier for the common cold. Besides, you could be positive now, but negative in a month's time because your body has fended it off. It has very little effect on men, save a link with very rare forms of cancer." Still want to get tested for HPV before ditching the condoms? Marie Stopes International (Mariestopes.org.uk) offers a combination smear and HPV test with a doctor's consultation for £210.

FALSE *Doctors think of it as an STI*

"Yes, it's sexually transmitted, but thrush can be spread that way too and no one thinks of it as an STI," says Sean. There are more than 100 different subtypes of HPV, but there are only a few to worry about, including 6 and 11, which often cause genital warts, and 16 and 18, commonly linked to cervical cancer.

TRUE *It causes other cancers too*

The bad news is HPV doesn't just cause cervical cancer. "Research shows that HPV is linked to mouth cancers too," says Dr Nigel Carter from the British Dental Health

Foundation. "The prediction is that, within the next decade, HPV will be more of a cause for mouth cancer than smoking." This is because when you have oral sex with someone who has HPV, it can be transmitted to the cells in your mouth. The latest figures say there are around 800 cases of HPV-related oral cancer a year in the UK.

FALSE *All of us should be worried about HPV*

"Even if you are positive for the strains of HPV that cause cancer, the chances of developing cervical cancer are still very remote," says Sean. "Out of 100,000 women, 80,000 will be positive for strains 16 or 18, or both, at some point in their lives. Only 13 of those 80,000 women will go on to develop cervical cancer." A tiny amount, and most will be treated successfully, Sean adds. Catching it early is key, so a smear test is a must. ♦

The man view We took to the streets and asked men if they knew what HPV is. Answer? Erm, not really.



"Not a clue. Is it something to do with fashion?"
George Martin, 24, London, recruitment



"Is it some sort of virus - human pampaloma [sic]?"
Tom Good, 21, Peterborough, designer

"Some kind of vehicle? An HGV is a heavy goods vehicle so an HPV would be... um..." James Eyre, 24, London, advertising manager