population will at some point have an active HPV infection. For most people it is a minor problem.

- If you have HPV the risk of cervical cancer increases if you smoke.

**HPV infection does not imply either infidelity or promiscuity.**

**What if I have further questions?**

If after reading this booklet you have further questions, please do not hesitate to contact the colposcopy clinic who will endeavour to pass your details to the Specialist Nurse on duty:

Tel: 0300 422 2914, Monday to Friday 9:00am to 5:00pm

**Sources**

Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust
Website: www.jostrust.org.uk

NHSCSP publications
Website: www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk

Introduction
The Human Papillomavirus (HPV) test is important as it can help doctors and nurses identify women who are at a higher risk of developing abnormal cells and cervical cancer. This test indicates which women might need further investigations, and can also reduce the number of screening appointments and colposcopies for some women.

What does your smear test mean?
If your smear test has been reported as Borderline or Mild Dyskaryosis, then, an HPV test has been carried out on your cervical sample to detect if you have High Risk HPV (HR HPV).

If your test has revealed HR HPV you will have been asked to attend the colposcopy clinic for further investigations. If you have had treatment for abnormal cells, your first smear test after treatment is also tested for HR HPV to ensure your body has cleared this virus.

What is HPV?
Human papillomavirus (HPV) is an extremely common virus affecting skin. There are over 100 different types of HPV, most of which are harmless and clear up themselves without treatment. However, some sub-types can contribute to changes in the cells of the cervix. Around 40 types of HPV affect the genital area and these are divided into high risk type (HR HPV) and low risk type (LR HPV).

Women with these changes progress to cervical cancer. It is not clear why persistent HPV infection causes more problems in some women than in others. However other factors can increase the risk of cervical cancer; these include smoking, having a weak immune system, first intercourse at an early age, having multiple partners or having intercourse with a partner who has had multiple partners.

Is it normal to feel emotional or upset about having HPV?
Some people do feel very upset. Women who have been told they have HPV frequently express surprise, anxiety and uncertainty about the link to cancer and the stigma of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). These feelings of guilt and shame are often centred around the transmission of the virus and potentially effects on their partner. Often women feel angry at their sexual partner(s), even though it is not possible to know exactly when or from whom the virus was spread. Please do not hesitate to discuss further with your clinic doctor, clinic nurses or GP’s.

Points to remember
• HPV is very common
• HPV is a normal consequence of sexual intercourse
• HPV infection can persist in the body without causing any problems for many years and can be eradicated by the immune system.
• You are not alone. Up to three quarters of the
Who can get HPV?
The majority of sexually active men and women will come into contact with HPV at some point in their life. HPV infection is considered to be a normal consequence of having sex. This is true whether they are heterosexual or same sex relationships. There is no blame to attach to your current partner or any other partner, or to yourself. Estimates suggest that between 50-79% of all women who have had sexual intercourse will become infected with one or more of the HPV types.

HPV is transmitted primarily by skin to skin contact (genital to genital, anal intercourse and oral sex). The time from exposure of the virus to the development of warts or cervical changes is highly variable. Therefore it is usually impossible to identify from whom the virus was contracted, as the virus can remain dormant in some people for many years. Having HPV is not an indication of having multiple partners or being in an unfaithful relationship. There are no symptoms associated with HPV infections that cause pre-cancerous abnormalities on the cervix in women or on the man’s penis. However it is possible for genital HPV to be transmitted via skin contact throughout an individual’s lifetime, although this may never cause a visible problem. These different types of non-cancerous strains of HPV can appear on the hands and feet (verrucas and warts) and the virus can also affect the penis, scrotum, anus and rectum causing genital warts.

In most women, their body’s own immune system will get rid of the infection without them ever knowing it was there. The infection is often short lived and it is only when it becomes persistent (which occurs in a small

HPV vaccination
The HPV vaccine in the UK is currently offered to all girls aged 12 to 13 years of age, in year 8 at school. This vaccine provides protection against the two high risk types of HPV (types 16 and 18) that cause over 70% of all cervical cancers, as well as two other types of HPV that cause genital warts. The aim is to administer the vaccine before they commence sexual activity so as to get the most benefit, before they become infected by the strains of HPV.

Does HPV cause cancer?
Some specific HPV infections can cause changes to the cells on the cervix creating abnormalities which can be detected by cervical smear tests. These abnormalities, if left untreated, can go on to become cancerous, although this will usually take several years. Therefore regular smear tests are the most effective defences against cervical cancer. Cervical screening is one of the most effective defences against cervical cancer, saving the lives of around 4,500 women per year in the UK.

Most types of HPV that cause cervical changes are not the ones that cause visible warts. Often the HPV infection is short lived, and it is only when it persists. In a small minority of women, that this may develop into pre-cancerous cells called Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia (CIN). It is very important to remember that very few
minority of women) that cervical abnormalities can develop. The presence of HR HPV can now be detected in women who attend for cervical smear tests.

It is not clear why persistent HPV infection causes more problems in some women than in others. However other factors can increase the risk of cervical cancer; these include smoking, having a weak immune system first intercourse at an early age, having multiple partners or having intercourse with a partner who has had multiple partners.

How do I know if I have HPV?

Anybody who has ever been sexually active is at risk of contracting HPV. HPV infections are very common and the majority of individuals will have no obvious signs or symptoms.

The vast majority of women with abnormal smears will have active HPV infection and do not have any symptoms. From April 2012, HR HPV testing has been introduced. If your smear test has been reported as showing low grade abnormalities either Borderline or Mild Dyskaryosis, then this test is carried out using the same sample of cells collected during a cervical smear test.

If your smear test shows a low grade abnormality or you have previously had treatment, testing positive for HPV does not necessarily mean that you will go on to develop cervical cancer. It does however indicate that you are at a greater risk than a woman who tests negative for HPV.

If you contract a HR HPV and this becomes a persistent infection then you have a higher risk of developing abnormal cells. Remember, attending cervical screening provides a very high degree of protection against cervical cancer.

How can I reduce the risks of having HPV infection?

Stop smoking

Women who smoke are approximately twice as likely to develop cervical abnormalities as non-smokers. This is because smoking suppresses the immune system, allowing the persistence of HPV infection. Stopping smoking appears to help the abnormalities return to normal. If you are considering stopping smoking, the clinic staff can refer you to the smoking cessation service. Please ask!

Immune system

Leading a healthy lifestyle helps your body’s natural defence stay strong against disease. A weakened immune system will not be as effective at clearing the viruses which could mean your risk of cervical abnormalities is higher than average. Women who are immunosuppresses (e.g. taking immunosuppressed drugs, following organ transplant or who are HIV+) may be at an increased risk of developing abnormalities.

Safe sex and condoms

Condoms offer a degree of protection against the transmission of HPV infections that cause cervical smear abnormalities. However, other types of HPV that cause genital warts can be present all over the genitalia so this protection is considered minimal. HPV that causes genital warts in men affects the skin of the penis,