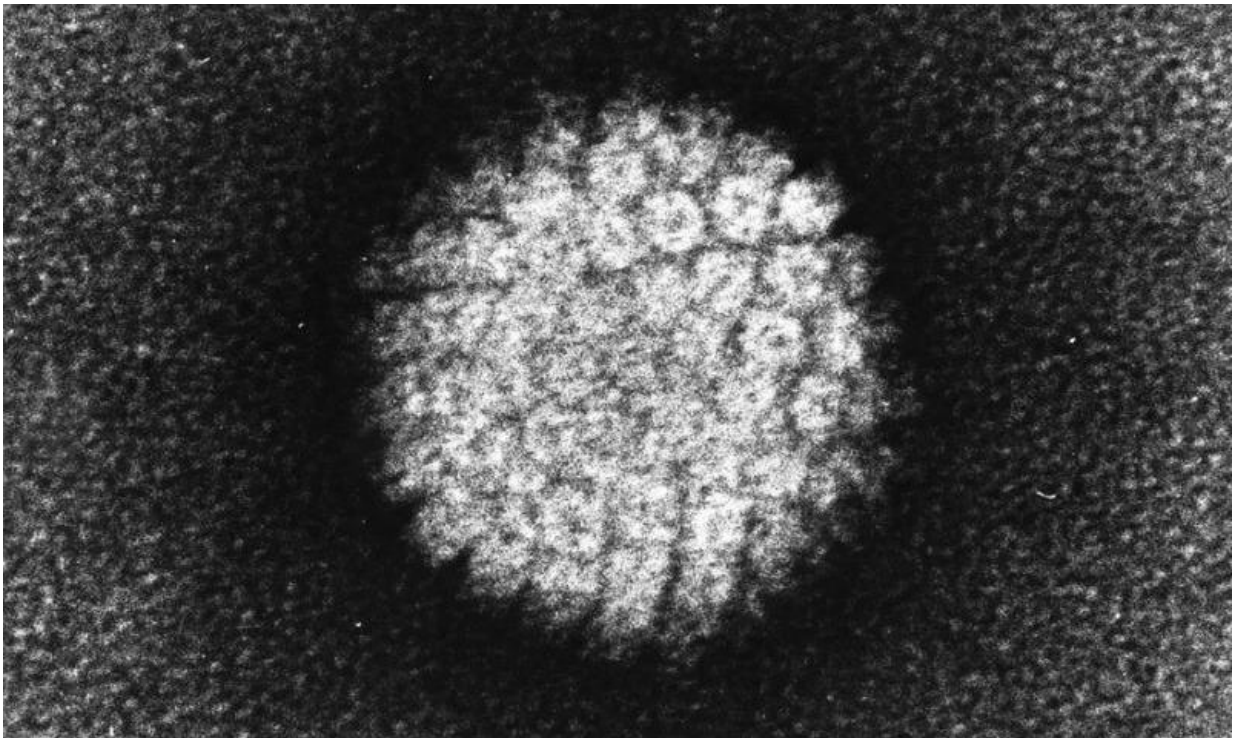


# HPV shame could put women off cervical cancer screening

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Electron micrograph of a negatively stained human papilloma virus (HPV) which occurs in human warts. Credit: public domain

The social stigmas and myths surrounding the human papilloma virus (HPV) could make women anxious, including raising fears about their partners' fidelity and putting them off going for cervical screening, according to research presented at Cancer Research UK's Early

Diagnosis Conference in Birmingham today (Wednesday).

A survey of more than 2,000 [women](#) by Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust showed that the wide range of stigmas associated with HPV included shame, fear and promiscuity. Almost 40% said they would be worried about what people thought of them if told they had HPV and more than 40% would worry their partner had been unfaithful.

Seven in 10 women would be scared to hear they had HPV and two thirds would worry it meant they had [cancer](#).

Many women who responded did not understand the link between HPV and cancer. One in three did not know it can cause cervical cancer and almost all of them did not know it can cause throat or mouth cancer.

Researchers found that only 15 per cent of those questioned realised HPV was commonplace. Eight in 10 women will have some form of HPV infection in their lifetime but only very few who have specific high-risk types of the virus will go on to develop cancer.

Sara Hiom, Cancer Research UK's director of [early diagnosis](#), said: "It's really concerning that there's so much misunderstanding about HPV. It's a very common virus and most of the time, it will sit dormant and not cause a problem.

"Testing for the virus is a better way to identify people who may have changes in their cervix, which, if left untreated, could develop into cervical cancer. So HPV [screening](#) is an excellent way to prevent cervical cancer from developing in the first place.

"Every woman has the choice whether to go for screening but busting the myths and removing the stigmas surrounding HPV is vital to ensure people feel more confident to book and turn up for their [cervical](#)

[screening](#) appointment."

This research comes as England prepares to replace the existing cervical cancer screening test, which looks for abnormal cells, with HPV screening later this year.

People taking part in cervical screening won't notice anything different, but the new test can more accurately identify women who may be more at risk of developing abnormal cervical cells or cervical cancer.

Right now, samples taken during screening are sent to be analysed under a microscope, to look for abnormal cell changes that could lead to cancer.

When HPV screening is introduced, samples will first be tested for the presence of HPV. If the test is positive, the sample will then be analysed by specialists under the microscope to look for cell changes. This has been shown to be much more effective at preventing cancer.

Presenting at Cancer Research UK's Early Diagnosis conference, Robert Music, Chief Executive of Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust, said: "We must address the level of misunderstanding that exists around HPV. Most people will get the virus in their lifetime so it is worrying to see such high levels of fear or shame associated with it. With the screening programme moving to testing for HPV first, which is to be celebrated, we must normalise the [virus](#) to ensure people fully understand what it means to have it."

Cancer Research UK helped prove the value of cervical screening, which now prevents thousands of deaths from [cervical cancer](#) each year.

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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