

Anal Cancer

People with HIV are much more likely to get anal cancer than people without the virus. The risk of this disease goes up the longer you live with HIV.

Symptoms

Signs include:

- Blood from your anus.
- Pain around the anus
- An itch or a fluid in the anus
- Changes in how wide your stool is
- Changes in when or how often you go to the bathroom
- A lump near the anus
- Swollen glands in or around the anus or groin

Causes

Most anal cancer is caused by human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is a common virus that is spread when you have sex with someone who has it. Two strains of HPV are linked to 8 out of 10 cases of anal cancer.

People used to think that anal sex spread HPV. New studies have shown that people with HIV have more anal HPV infections. It does not matter how they have sex. The immune system of a person with HIV is less able to defend itself against this virus.

Risk Factors

The risk of anal cancer is higher if a person:

- Had sexually transmitted infections (STI) in the past
- Has a low CD4 cell count
- Smokes

Prevention

A person with HIV should be screened for HPV. Anal cancer can be treated best when it is found early. You should get an anal Pap test every 1-3 years to check for cancer cells.

Men who have sex with men (MSM) are more often infected with HPV. They are also much more likely to be diagnosed with anal cancer.

A high CD4 cell count helps prevent this type of cancer. Follow your HIV treatment just as your doctor prescribes for a healthy immune system.

Use condoms every time you have sex. Condoms reduce your chance of getting HPV and other STIs.

Ask your doctor about the HPV vaccine (Gardasil). The HPV vaccine is approved for people up to age 26. It protects against four types of HPV. It can help prevent anal cancer and other cancers.

Do you have Anal Cancer?

A doctor's exam is needed to find anal cancer.

This will include a rectal exam. The doctor will put a greased finger into the rectum and gently feel for lumps.

He or she might order an *anoscopy*. This lets the doctor have a clear view of any problem areas. An acid may be used to check for cells that are not normal. The doctor may take a small piece of tissue to take a closer look.

A doctor may send you to a proctologist. This is a doctor who deals with any disease of the rectum, anus, colon and pelvic floor.

Treatment

If anal cancer is found, other tests may be done. These include:

- Chest X-ray to see if the cancer has spread to the lungs
- Ultrasound, which makes a picture of your organs
- Scans such as a CT, MRI or PET take pictures of the inside of your body. They can show if the cancer has spread.

In most cases, the tumor is taken out with surgery.

Surgery may remove only the cancer. This may save the ring of muscle around the anus that opens and closes to release waste.

Surgery called *colostomy* may be needed to remove the cancer, the anus and the lower part of the rectum. The doctor will need to make a hole in the body for waste to pass through. The patient wears a special bag to collect waste. It sticks to the skin around the hole with special glue. It is thrown away after it is used. The bag does not show under your clothes.

After surgery, the doctor may suggest other treatments like radiation and chemotherapy.

Radiation sends high-energy rays at cancer cells to kill them. The rays are focused on the area of your body where the cancer was found. This can sometimes burn the skin around that spot. It is used by itself or with chemotherapy.

Chemotherapy kills cancer with drugs. The drugs are given in pills or through a needle. These drugs are very strong and can leave a person weak. They can have many of the same side effects as HIV treatment. Chemo treatment is hard on your immune system. Extra care should be taken to avoid infection while on these drugs.

Once you have had anal cancer, there is a chance that it will come back. Ask your doctor how often you should have an exam to test for anal cancer.

For more information

Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call Positive Healthcare's Nurse Advice Line at: (800) 797-1717.

