

# Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

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**What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?** HPV is a large family of viruses that infect the skin, often causing irregular cell growth or warts. There are over 100 types of HPV. Many infect the genital area (vulva, vagina, cervix, rectum, anus, penis or scrotum). Some types (*low risk HPV*) can cause genital warts. Other types (*high risk HPV*) can lead to cervical cancer and other less common cancers in both men and women.

## **How many people get HPV?**

HPV is one of the most common sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). About 75% - 90% of all people who have sex are likely to get HPV at some point in their lives. About 6 million Americans get HPV every year.

## **How is HPV transmitted?**

HPV is spread during vaginal or anal sex when the infected skin of one person rubs against the skin of the other person. The risk from oral sex is very low. Casual contact like hugging or kissing does not spread HPV. There is a small chance of transmitting HPV to a baby during pregnancy or childbirth.

## **What are the symptoms?**

Most people who get HPV never know they have it. Most HPV infections cause no symptoms at all. HPV can stay inactive for weeks, months or even years before it might show up on tests or cause symptoms. This makes it hard to know when or from whom a person got the virus. Even when there are no symptoms, it is still possible to spread HPV. Genital warts usually appear a few weeks up to 3 months after infection. It can sometimes take up to a year for warts to show up. Therefore, the appearance of warts doesn't always mean recent sex with an infected partner.

## **What happens if I have HPV?**

Over time, a healthy immune system can often clear the virus or at least suppress it. However, some infections cause genital warts or changes in cell growth that can lead to cancer.

- **Genital Warts** Genital warts may be smooth, flat bumps or small, cauliflower-like growths. Warts usually stay small (less than a quarter inch in size) but can grow larger if not treated. They may be on the vulva, vaginal opening, penis and anus – usually where there's a lot of rubbing during sex. They are painless but may bleed or itch. Anal warts are most common in men who have sex with men but can also occur in other men and women.
- **Cervical Cancer** Most infections with high-risk HPV types do not lead to cancer. The immune system can often remove the virus before it causes problems. When it does occur, it usually takes 5 years to 10 years (or even more) for cancer to develop. This is why Pap smears are so important for women. A Pap smear can find these abnormal cell changes so that they can be treated before they lead to cancer.

Other medical problems can cause these same symptoms, so talk to your health care provider. Getting regular pap smear tests is the best way to find cancer as early as possible.

*See your healthcare provider as soon as possible if you think you have genital warts or any STD. If you do have genital warts, tell all of the partners you had in the last 3 months before the warts appeared. Make sure your sex partner(s) get treated too so you don't get infected again.*

### **How do I avoid getting HPV?**

Because most genital HPV infections do not have symptoms and so many people are already infected, HPV infection is very hard to prevent. There is a vaccine for some types of HPV for girls and women. The only sure way to avoid HPV and other STDs is to not have sex.

### **If you do have sex:**

- Talk with your partner(s) beforehand about HPV and other STDs. Work out a safety plan that feels comfortable to both of you.
- Use condoms every time. Male condoms can prevent most, but not all, skin-to-skin contact during sex. Female condoms cover more skin and may protect better than male condoms.
- Check your partner's genitals. Don't have sex if you see any unusual bumps.
- Have sex with fewer people. More partners = more risk!
- Have sex with one partner who has sex with only you.

### **Birth control methods (the pill, patch, ring, or shot) do not protect you against any STD.**

**How do I find out if I have HPV?** There is no general test for men or women to check one's overall "HPV status." HPV usually goes away on its own, without causing health problems. So an HPV infection that is found today will most likely not be there a year or two from now. For this reason, there is no need to be tested just to find out if you have HPV now.

An experienced healthcare provider can usually diagnose genital warts just by looking at them. Early signs of **cervical cancer** can be found by routine Pap tests. The HPV test can identify high-risk HPV types on a woman's cervix, which can cause cervical cell changes and cancer.

There is currently no approved test to find HPV or related cancers in men. HPV-related cancers are very rare in men. Anal pap smears may be an option for men at higher risk for anal cancer.

### **How is HPV treated?**

There is no treatment for the virus itself. Over time, a healthy immune system can often clear the virus or at least suppress it. There are treatments, however, for genital warts and cervical cancer.

For some people, genital warts will go away on their own. Healthcare providers have many ways to remove them directly. They may also prescribe creams to patients to treat the warts at home. Many people need more than one method. Even after treatment, warts can return. There are no "over-the-counter" treatments for genital warts. *Do not use regular wart remover on genital warts.*

If caught early, cervical cancer can be fully treated. There are new forms of surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy available for patients. Women who get routine Pap testing and follow-up as needed can identify problems before cancer develops. Prevention is always better than treatment. Other HPV-related cancers can also be treated successfully.

### **How does HPV affect pregnancy?**

A mother with genital warts can pass the infection to her infant during birth. Genital warts can get larger during pregnancy. Some treatments may harm the baby in the womb and should be avoided.

### **What is the HPV vaccine?**

A vaccine is now available for females. It protects against 2 types of HPV that cause 90% of all genital warts and 2 types of HPV that cause 70% of all cervical cancer. The HPV vaccine is given in 3 injections over 6 months. There are no serious side effects.

The vaccine works best if the body has never been exposed to HPV. Therefore it is highly recommended for all girls and young women 9 - 26 years old. Ask your healthcare provider if the vaccine is right for you. The vaccine is currently being studied for men.

### **For more help**

- Washington State HIV/HEPC/STD hotline - (800) 272-AIDS (2437) - Testing and treatment resources and information.
- American Social Health Association STI Resource Center - (919) 361-8488 - STI/STD information.
- Centers for Disease Control National STD/HIV Hotline - (800) CDC-INFO (232-4636) Spanish (800) 344-7432, TTY (800) 243-7889 - General information on many health topics including STDs and HIV.

### **More information**

- [HPV and Cervical Cancer Prevention Resource Center](#) (American Social Health Association)
- [Genital HPV infection fact sheet](#) (Centers for Disease Control)
- [HPV information](#) (Planned Parenthood)

