



Genital Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

FACT SHEET

What is HPV?

Genital human papillomavirus (also called HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI). HPV is so common that at least 50% of sexually active men and women get it at some point in their lives. There are more than 40 HPV types that can infect the genital areas of males and females. These HPV types can also infect the mouth and throat.

What are the symptoms of HPV?

Most people who become infected with HPV do not develop symptoms and do not even know they have it. In 90% of cases, the body's immune system clears HPV naturally within two years.

Sometimes, certain types of HPV can cause genital warts in males and females.

Genital warts usually appear as a small bump or groups of bumps in the genital area. They can be small or large, raised or flat, or shaped like a cauliflower. Health care providers can diagnose warts by looking at the genital area during an office visit. Warts can appear within weeks or months after sexual contact with an infected partner—even if the infected partner has no signs of genital warts. If left untreated, genital warts might go away, remain unchanged, or increase in size or number. They will not turn into cancer.

Other HPV types can cause cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer usually does not have symptoms until it is quite advanced. For this reason, it is important for women to get regular screening for cervical cancer. Screening tests can find early signs of disease so that problems can be treated early, before they ever turn into cancer.

The types of HPV that can cause genital warts are not the same as the types that can cause cancer. There is no way to know which people who get HPV will go on to develop cancer or other health problems. Certain populations are at higher risk for some HPV-related health problems. This includes gay and bisexual men, and people with weak immune systems (including those who have HIV/AIDS).

How do people get HPV?

HPV is passed on through genital contact, most often during vaginal and anal sex. HPV may also be passed on during oral sex and genital-to-genital contact. HPV can be passed on between straight and same-sex partners—even when the infected partner has no signs or symptoms.

A person can have HPV even if years have passed since he or she had sexual contact with an infected person. Most infected persons do not realize they are infected or that they are passing the virus on to a sex partner. It is also possible to get more than one type of HPV. Very rarely, a pregnant woman with genital HPV can pass HPV to her baby during delivery.

How can HPV be prevented?

Vaccines can protect males and females against some of the most common types of HPV. These vaccines are given in three shots. It is important to get all three doses to get the best protection. The vaccines are most effective when given before a person's first sexual contact.

- **Girls and women:** Two vaccines (Cervarix and Gardasil) are available to protect females against the types of HPV that cause most cervical cancers. One of these vaccines (Gardasil) also protects against most genital warts. Both vaccines are recommended for 11 and 12 year-old girls, and for females 13 through 26 years of age, who did not get any or all of the shots when they were younger. These vaccines can also be given to girls as young as 9 years of age. It is recommended that females get the same vaccine brand for all three doses, whenever possible.
- **Boys and men:** One available vaccine (Gardasil) protects males against most genital warts. This vaccine is available for boys and men, 9 through 26 years of age.

For those who choose to be sexually active, condoms may lower the risk of HPV. To be most effective, they should be used with every sex act, from start to finish. Condoms may also lower the risk of developing HPV-related diseases, such as genital warts and cervical cancer. But HPV can infect areas that are not covered by a condom - so condoms may not fully protect against HPV.

People can also lower their chances of getting HPV by being in a faithful relationship with one partner; limiting their number of sex partners; and choosing a partner who has had no or few prior sex partners. But even people with only one lifetime sex partner can get HPV. And it may not be possible to determine if a partner who has been sexually active in the past is currently infected. That's why the only sure way to prevent HPV is to avoid all sexual activity.

How is HPV diagnosed?

The HPV tests on the market are only used to help screen for cervical cancer. There is no general test for men or women to check one's overall "HPV status," nor is there an HPV test to find HPV on the genitals or in the mouth or throat

What is the treatment for HPV?

There is no treatment for the virus itself, but there are treatments for the diseases that HPV can cause:

Visible genital warts can be removed by the patient him or herself with medications. They can also be treated by a health care provider. Some people choose not to treat warts, but to see if they disappear on their own. No one treatment is better than another.

Cervical cancer is most treatable when it is diagnosed and treated early. But women who get routine Pap tests and follow up as needed can identify problems before cancer develops. Prevention is always better than treatment.