

HPV

Human Papillomavirus

HPV stands for Human Papillomavirus. It is a virus that lives on the skin and sometimes causes warts. There are many different kinds. They are spread by skin-to-skin contact with someone who has HPV. Some HPV is passed through vaginal, oral, or anal sex. HPV is very contagious. Even people with no visible warts can spread the virus to others.

HPV is a very common STD. Two types are related to cancer, especially cervical cancer in women. Men can get cancer of the anus or penis. Very few people who have HPV will develop cancer, but any sexually active woman should have regular Pap tests to check for any abnormal cells on her cervix.

Signs and symptoms

Most people do not notice symptoms at all, especially women. Genital warts can appear weeks, months, or years after sex with an infected partner. Genital warts look like other warts. They are small bumps of different sizes, shapes, and colors. They can be hard or soft, pink or gray. They usually appear in groups that look like tiny cauliflower. The warts are not usually painful, although they may itch. Don't treat warts with anything before going to a doctor.

The types of HPV that cause visible warts are not the same as HPV related to cancer.

Testing

HPV is usually diagnosed by looking at the warts or by an abnormal Pap test. If a woman has an abnormal Pap, her doctor may do more tests to see if she has HPV.

All sexually active women should have regular Pap tests, usually once a year. A Pap test is done by using a swab to get a few cells from the cervix and it doesn't hurt. The swab is sent to a laboratory for testing.

Treatment

HPV cannot be cured, only treated. However, HPV doesn't always need treatment. The body will often clear the infection on its own, whether the warts are visible or not. If the warts are large and uncomfortable, there are several methods for removal. Freezing is a common way. There is also a gel or cream that can be applied and washed off later. Some medicines should never be used by pregnant women. Be sure to tell your doctor if you are pregnant before having genital warts treated.

It is important to remember that treatment only removes the warts; it does not kill the virus that causes the warts. Many people will get the warts again after treatment.

Prevention

- **Get vaccinated.** A vaccine is now available that prevents the four most common types of HPV, including two types that are most related to cervical cancer. It is only available for females between the ages of 9 and 26 at this time.
- **Use condoms correctly every time you have sex.** Condoms can provide some protection against HPV if they cover the infected area. Condoms are also good protection against other STDs.
- **Have fewer sex partners.** The more partners you have, the greater your chances of getting HPV or any other STD.
- **Birth control pills do not prevent infection.**

Learn more about HPV

If you have questions or need more information, contact your doctor, local health department, or community clinic, or call the National STD Hotline at **1-800-227-8922**.

For persons with disabilities this document is available on request in other formats. To submit a request, please call 1-800-525-0127 (TTY/TDD 1-800-833-6388).