

# Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

## What is human papillomavirus?

Human papillomavirus, or HPV, is the name of a group of viruses. There are many types of HPV, including types that cause genital warts and types that can possibly develop into cancer if not treated. HPV infection is one of the most common sexually transmitted diseases.

## How does it occur?

Many types of HPV are passed from one person to another during sexual relations. Several of these types cause genital warts. Some types of HPV can develop spontaneously and not because of sexual relations.

Genital warts usually appear on the inside and outside of the genital area. They may spread to other nearby areas of the body. You may get warts in your mouth if you have had oral sexual contact with an infected person.

Genital warts are seen more often in women who have several sexual partners or who have a male partner who has several sexual partners.

## What are the symptoms of HPV infection?

Many times there are no symptoms. In other cases growths that you can feel (warts) may appear in the genital or rectal area within several weeks, months, or years after contact with an infected person.

You may also have:

- mild irritation
- burning
- itching
- pain
- a foul smell
- pain with intercourse
- increased vaginal discharge
- bleeding.

## How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and do a pelvic exam. Often HPV is discovered when a Pap smear is done. If the results of a Pap smear are abnormal, your provider may examine your vagina and cervix with a magnifying instrument called a colposcope. Your provider may then do a biopsy, removing a sample of tissue to examine under a microscope. This will help determine if HPV is the reason the Pap smear was abnormal. An abnormal Pap smear does not necessarily mean that you have HPV. There are other reasons for abnormal Pap smear results.

Sometimes a DNA test may be done to see if the type of HPV you have is the type associated with cervical cancer.

## How is it treated?

There are several ways to treat HPV. Your health care provider will discuss your treatment choices with you. Usually the treatment is done in the provider's office.

Possible treatments are:

- medications that are put on the site of the HPV infection
- cryotherapy--freezing with liquid nitrogen
- laser treatment--a high-intensity light beam used to destroy the infection
- electrosurgery--an electric current used to burn or remove the infection with a wire loop
- surgery--cutting away the growths or infection.

If you have several growths or large growths, you may need to have a local anesthetic before your health care provider removes the warts. Genital warts that persist or recur after standard treatment may be treated with interferon injections. Interferons are proteins that boost the body's immune response and help keep viruses from multiplying.

## How long will the effects last?

Treatment can remove the warts, but it may not eliminate the virus. As a result, the warts may come back and you may need more treatments.

Most HPV infections are not dangerous to your health. However, some types of HPV are related to the development of cervical cancer and other types of cancers. For this reason it is especially important for women who have had HPV infection to have regular Pap smears to check for precancerous conditions.

## How can I take care of myself?

If you have an unusual vaginal discharge or notice growths in the genital area, see your health care provider. When you have an abnormal Pap test, follow your provider's advice for evaluation and treatment. Your provider will tell you how often you should have follow-up exams and Pap smears. Do not have sex if you or your partner has HPV.

## What can be done to help prevent HPV or its complications?

- Practice safe sex: Use a latex condom every time you have sex and have only one sexual partner.
- Avoid sexual contact until genital warts or HPV is treated.
- Avoid smoking. Studies show that smoking increases the risks and problems related to HPV infection.
- Get a pelvic exam and Pap test at least once a year.

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