

Genital Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Infection in Women

What is HPV?

HPV is human papillomavirus. It is the most common viral sexually transmitted infection for both men and women. Some types of HPV are called “low risk”. Those can infect the skin around the genitals and cause genital warts. Other types of HPV are called “high risk”. When those types infect internal genital areas they sometimes cause precancerous or cancerous changes on the cervix (opening to the uterus) or vagina. “High risk” HPV can also cause precancerous changes on the external genital areas (vulva).

How common is HPV?

HPV is very common. Most men and women who have had sex get HPV. Fortunately, many HPV infections go away on their own without causing any problems for the infected person. Most infected people don’t even know they have had HPV.

Is HPV infection serious?

There are lots of different kinds of HPV, and most are not serious. Infection with a “low risk” virus can cause genital warts but will not produce major problems. However, sometimes “high risk” HPV infection can cause skin cells to grow abnormally. The growth may be precancerous and could eventually become a potentially serious problem, such as cancer of the cervix, vagina, vulva, or anus.

How did I get HPV?

You probably got HPV through skin-to-skin contact with an infected person during vaginal, oral, or anal sex. It is possible for a person to have HPV in skin cells and pass it on to another person even when no genital warts are present. Most people who have HPV do not have any signs of it and do not know they have it.

What about HPV and oral sex?

If a person performs oral sex on a partner with genital HPV, there is a small chance that his or her mouth can become infected. Wart-like lesions and precancers can develop in the mouth or throat. Untreated precancerous lesions in the mouth or throat can turn into cancer after a long time. If a person receives oral sex from a partner with HPV in his or her mouth, that person can possibly develop a genital HPV infection. Currently there is no screening test for oral HPV. Your healthcare provider or dentist can carefully examine your mouth to look for lesions, but it is unknown how helpful that will be in preventing HPV-related mouth or throat cancers.

What increases my chances of developing a genital HPV infection?

The more sexual partners you have, the greater your chances are of getting an HPV infection. Using condoms may reduce your chances of getting infected, but condoms do not always help because HPV can be present in areas not covered by the condom. Your immune system also determines whether you may develop a HPV infection when you are exposed. A healthy immune system keeps you from being sick. People with poorly functioning immune systems are more likely to get a HPV infection. Smoking tobacco weakens your immune system and increases your risk for getting HPV when exposed to the virus.

How long have I had HPV?

It is impossible to know exactly how long you have had HPV. If you have had more than one sexual partner in your lifetime, it is impossible to tell which partner gave you HPV. If you had sexual contact with an infected person, it usually takes a few weeks or months for genital warts to appear or for a Pap test to become abnormal. You may have had HPV for some time before it was discovered by a physical exam, abnormal Pap test, or HPV laboratory test.

How is HPV diagnosed?

HPV can be diagnosed in several ways.

- w Sometimes the skin changes on external areas can be seen on physical exam.
- w Many infected women first learn they have HPV when they have an abnormal Pap test.
- w At times, a specific test for the HPV virus recognizes it in infected cells on the cervix.
(This test is not useful on other parts of the body or in men.)
- w When HPV infection of the cervix or vagina or anus is suspected, your health care provider can use a colposcope to shine a light on and magnify the cervix and vaginal walls and/or the anus. Often a tiny piece of tissue (a biopsy) is taken and examined in a laboratory to check for changes produced by HPV

How is HPV treated?

Like all other virus infections, HPV infection cannot be cured with medication. Luckily, your body's immune system can and usually does get rid of the infection and the skin changes it causes.

However, the abnormal skin growths (genital warts or precancerous changes) caused by HPV can be treated with medication or minor surgery. The type of treatment depends on the location, number, and kind of skin changes. If the virus has caused only slight abnormalities, then no treatment may be necessary at this time. Careful monitoring for future changes with self-examination, regular Pap tests, or possible colposcopy may be necessary. If more severe skin abnormalities are found, they often need to be treated. There are many ways that your health care provider can treat abnormal areas. Some treatment can be done at home, and other types of treatment must be done in the clinic. Your health care provider will discuss these treatment options with you.

Will I still have HPV after treatment?

There is no cure for HPV. The goal of treatment is to remove the abnormal area that contains the virus without causing damage to the normal, healthy tissue surrounding the abnormal area. It is likely that a small amount of virus will remain after treatment. Often your body's immune system can take care of the remaining virus.

How can I prevent spreading HPV to others?

You can reduce the chance that you will share your HPV infection with other people by having any abnormal skin or genital warts treated until they are gone. Using condoms during sexual intercourse and dental dams during oral sex may also help to reduce the spread of infection. However, condoms or dams may not always completely prevent the spread of HPV infection, because HPV may be in skin that is not protected by the condom or dam. Now that you know you have HPV, you should tell your current (and past) sexual partner(s), so that they can be examined and treated, if appropriate.

Will having HPV cause problems if I become pregnant?

Problems caused by HPV in pregnancy are unlikely. There is a very small chance that your baby could catch HPV from you. The baby could inhale HPV-infected cells from your birth canal during birth. Although it rarely happens, the baby's vocal cords can become infected with the virus. This could cause breathing problems and would require treatment. Usually, women with HPV have regular vaginal deliveries. Only women who have very large genital warts that block the birth canal need a Cesarean section because of the HPV infection.

What should I do to take care of myself?

- You may want to check yourself for the development of new warts following treatment.
- If you discover new genital warts, have them treated as soon as possible.
- Having genital warts may mean that you are at a slightly greater risk for getting cervical cancer.
- Women should have regular Pap tests.
- If you smoke tobacco, stop!
- Try to keep your stress level low, get enough sleep, and eat a nutritionally balanced diet.
- If you are a woman between the ages of 9 and 26, ask your healthcare provider whether you should get the HPV vaccine. Even if you have already been infected with one type of HPV, the vaccine will prevent infection with other types.

How can I cope with HPV?

Be sure to get regular check-ups, including Pap tests. If you see genital skin changes, make an appointment with your health care provider for an exam. These feelings are normal. It is common for people with HPV to feel angry, upset, depressed or ashamed about their condition. Some women may also be concerned about the risk for cancer. Keep in mind that HPV can be managed and cervical cancer can almost always be prevented. Talk to your health care provider about your concerns. Keeping yourself healthy and not smoking can help boost your body's natural defense system to fight the virus.

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