



Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and Genital Warts

What is Human Papillomavirus?

Human papillomavirus, or HPV, is a group of viruses that can infect the genital area, including the skin of the penis, vulva, labia, anus, and the vagina and cervix. HPV infection of the cervix can cause changes or abnormalities on a woman's Pap smear. Some subtypes of the virus can cause cancer of the cervix or, much more rarely, cancer of the penis or anus.

Genital HPV disease is spread through or oral sexual contact with an infected person. Many people with HPV infection show no signs or symptoms of the disease and are not aware that they have the infection, even though they can still spread it to others. In addition, the virus can stay dormant for years, making it very difficult for an infected person to determine when or from whom the infection was spread.

What are the signs and symptoms of genital HPV infection?

Some people with HPV infection get genital warts. The often cauliflower-shaped warts appear most commonly on the penis, vulva (exterior of the vagina), cervix, vagina or anus. Genital warts usually develop one to three months after exposure (sometimes longer). The warts are dry, firm, and painless and can be large or small, flat or raised. However, many genital papillomavirus infections cause no visible warts. See your healthcare provider with concerns about any bumps or growths in the genital region.

If you are a woman who has ever had sex, you should have a Pap smear regularly. Women often learn they have HPV infection when they have an abnormal Pap smear. HPV is one common cause of abnormalities on Pap smears. Depending on the type of abnormality found, a test called a colposcopy may be recommended. Colposcopy is an examination of the cervix and surrounding genital area under magnification for signs of the virus infection and for the precancerous or cancerous changes that can sometimes be caused by the virus.

HPV can also cause problems during pregnancy, as hormonal changes can cause the warts to grow in number and size. Occasionally, this can interfere with vaginal delivery.

How serious is this infection?

Most women who are infected with HPV never have a serious problem, but a small percentage will develop precancerous changes in the cervix. An even smaller number develop cervical cancer. The vast majority of women with precancerous changes do not require anything more than local treatment to the cervix, although, of course, these women are watched closely and checked often.

How long does the infection last?

There is no definite time period for the duration of infection. Genital warts can resolve without treatment, and research has shown that for 90% of women, HPV infection of the cervix becomes undetectable within two years. However, infection may last for years, and recurrence is common, even when warts are removed. Cigarette smoking appears to interfere with the body's ability to fight off HPV infection and raises a woman's risk for developing cervical cancer.

Can I be tested for it?

The lab often does automatic HPV testing on abnormal Pap smears. HPV testing is also available by request. The sample is obtained from a swab of the cervix just like collecting a Pap smear.



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How can I prevent HPV infection?

Having sex with only one partner who has sex only with you can reduce the risk of getting HPV infection. Using condoms can reduce, but not eliminate, the risk for infection because condoms cannot cover all affected skin. Remember, in most individuals, HPV shows no symptoms. Even if you cannot see warts on the genitals of your sexual partner, your partner could have HPV.

A vaccine (Gardasil®) is now available for prevention of HPV. It is currently recommended for females of ages 9-26. It protects against the most common strains of HPV causing cervical infection and genital warts but not all strains. It appears to be very effective, and we highly recommend it.

What is the Treatment?

Treatment for HPV depends on the location and extent of the infection. Genital warts can be treated in a variety of ways: chemical treatments, cryotherapy ("freezing"), cautery treatment ("burning"), laser treatment, surgical excision, or prescription creams applied at home. Do not try to treat genital warts yourself with nonprescription remedies, as this can damage the genital area and cause unnecessary soreness. Remember, even though genital warts may be removed, the infection itself may not be cured. Recurrences are common and require repeat treatments.

For more information:

Contact your health care provider or
The American Social Health Association
STI Resource Center Hotline
1-800-227-8922
www.ashastd.org/

For more information on HPV infection or genital warts, please ask your healthcare provider.

