

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

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familydoctor.org editorial staff



What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common sexually transmitted virus. It is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the United States. There are more than 100 types of HPV. Some types don't cause any symptoms. Other types cause genital warts. More aggressive kinds of HPV can cause cancer in both women and men. This includes cancer of the cervix, vagina, vulva, anus, penis, and throat.

HPV is passed between people through genital or skin-to-skin contact. Both men and women can get HPV and pass it on. Often, they don't know they have it, so they don't realize they are passing it to other people. Nearly all people who have had sex will get HPV at some point in their lives.

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Symptoms of HPV

In most cases, HPV—including the kinds that cause cancer—does not have symptoms.

The main symptom people see with some types of HPV infection is genital warts. Genital warts can be small or large, flat or raised. Sometimes they are described as looking like cauliflower. There can be just one, or they can appear in groups. They can appear on the anus, cervix, scrotum, penis, groin, or thigh.

Another type of HPV can cause warts to develop on other parts of your body, such as your hands and feet. The types of HPV that cause warts generally do not cause cancer.

What causes HPV?

Infection from HPV happens when the virus gets into your body. This most often happens during vaginal, anal, or oral sex with a person who is already infected. HPV is spread through skin-to-skin contact, not through bodily fluids.

How is HPV diagnosed?

If you think you have warts in your genital area, call your family doctor. He or she will be able to diagnose it with an examination.

For women, diagnosis of HPV often starts with abnormal results from a routine Pap test. When you have a Pap test (or “smear”), the doctor will take a sample of cells from your cervix. The sample is sent to a lab and looked at under a microscope. If abnormal cells are found, your doctor may do another Pap test and include a cervical HPV test. This test can identify many of the HPV types that can cause cervical cancer. This is the only HPV test approved by the FDA.

If you have a type of HPV that can cause cancer, your doctor may want to perform a colposcopy. In this test, he or she will use a special magnifying lens to get a closer look at your cervix. If the tissue looks abnormal, they will cut out a small bit to perform a biopsy. This test will check for signs of cancer.

There is no FDA-approved test for HPV for men. Men who have sex with other men or are HIV-positive might be a candidate for an anal Pap test. This test will not confirm HPV, but it can find abnormal skin cells.

Can HPV be prevented or avoided?

Because HPV is such a common virus, it is hard to avoid it completely. But there are steps you can take to lower your risk.

- Have few sex partners.
- Avoid sex with people who have had many sex partners.
- Use condoms consistently and correctly, though they may not cover all areas of skin where the virus lives.

HPV often shows no symptoms. Sometimes symptoms show up weeks or months after you've been infected. This makes it harder for you to not spread the infection. It is less common for men to develop complications from HPV. But they can spread the virus to women, where cancer from the virus is more common. So it is important to do your best to avoid HPV.

HPV vaccine

There is an HPV vaccine available that can protect against diseases caused by HPV, including cancers. It is approved by the FDA.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says girls and boys between the ages of 11 and 12 should get the vaccine. It is most effective when the person is vaccinated before becoming sexually active. Teenagers and young adults can get the vaccine, too. It is approved for anyone between 9 years and 26 years of age.

The CDC also recommends the vaccine for men 26 and under who have sex with other men or are HIV-positive.

The vaccine is given in multiple doses (shots) over 6 to 12 months. Children age 9 to 14 receive 2 doses. Those 15 or older receive 3 doses. It's important to get all of the doses to make sure you or your child are getting the most protection from HPV infection.

Without health insurance, vaccines can be expensive. The CDC's Vaccines for Children (VFC) program provides free vaccines for some families. If you have low income and don't have insurance for vaccinations, you might qualify.



HPV Treatment

There is no cure or treatment for the virus itself. In many men and women, HPV goes away on its own without causing any health problems. There are treatments for the conditions the virus causes. These include genital warts, precancerous cells, and cancer.

Genital warts must be treated by your doctor. Do not try to treat the warts yourself. Don't use over-the-counter wart-removal products. These chemicals are not supposed to be used for genital warts. They can irritate the skin.

If precancerous cells are found, the abnormal tissue is removed so it doesn't turn into cancer. If cancer is found, treatment will vary. It will depend on the type of cancer, the stage, and the patient's age.

Living with HPV

You may test positive for HPV without having signs of cancer or genital warts. Your doctor will likely want you to get a repeat Pap test every 4 to 6 months until the infection is gone. This could take up to 2 years.

Most women who get their routine Pap tests and follow their doctor's advice will not get cervical cancer. It takes a long time to develop, and regular check-ups help find issues early, before they get more serious.

Questions to ask your doctor

- What treatment is best for me?
- How can I avoid getting HPV?
- Is it possible to have sex with my boyfriend/girlfriend without giving him/her HPV?
- If I have HPV, am I at higher risk of getting another STI?
- How long will my treatment last?
- Are there any side effects of my treatment?
- Are there any support groups in my area?
- If my symptoms get worse, when should I call my doctor?
- Should I have my son vaccinated against HPV?

Resources

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: HPV Vaccination: What Everyone Should Know](#)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Vaccines for Children Program](#)

[National Institutes of Health, MedlinePlus: HPV](#)