

HPV

What is HPV?

HPV can be very confusing because there are at least 100 types of human papilloma virus. Some cause warts on various parts of the body: plantar warts on the feet, common hand warts, juvenile warts, butcher's warts, and genital warts. As a group, they also cause other genital HPV infections that are not visible. A wide variety of benign and cancerous growths also may be associated with HPVs. ***However, it is critical you know about them because a group of the human papilloma viruses (6, 11, 16, and 18) cause 70 percent of the cases of cervical cancer in the United States.***

How many people have genital HPV infections?

Up to 1 out of every 10 Americans have genital HPV infections. Between 500,000 and one million new cases of genital warts occur every year. Some studies show that about one third of all sexually active teenagers have genital HPV infections. Other research documents that within 5 years of becoming sexually active 80 percent of all women will contract HPV. Because they don't have symptoms or don't recognize them, millions of people do not know they carry HPV.

How can I recognize genital HPV infections?

Genital warts caused by HPV may be found on the vulva, in the vagina, and on the cervix, penis, anus, and urethra of infected women and men. They are found very rarely in the mouth or throat. They often are flesh-colored, are soft to the touch, and may look like miniature cauliflower florets. Usually they grow in more than one location and may cluster in large masses.

Genital warts usually are painless but may itch. If allowed to grow, they can block the openings of the vagina, urethra, or anus and become very uncomfortable. Depending on their location, genital warts can cause sores and bleeding. Genital warts often grow more rapidly during pregnancy.

There are other genital HPV infections that cannot be seen with the naked eye. Some are more dangerous than genital warts because they are associated with cancers of the cervix, vulva, vagina, or penis.

How are genital HPV infections spread?

Genital HPVs can spread whether or not warts are present. They are almost exclusively spread by vaginal or anal intercourse. Because genital HPV infections are often undetected, they can be transmitted by sex partners who do not know they're infected.

Who is most likely to get genital HPV infections?

People most at risk for genital HPV infections are:

- people with infected partners

- people who are sexually involved with a number of different partners
- people whose sex partners are sexually involved with a number of different partners
- people with weakened immune systems

The majority of those now seeking treatment for genital warts are young women between the ages of 15 and 29.

Is there a cure for genital HPV infections?

Although some people have had no recurrences, a permanent cure cannot be guaranteed. Whether or not warts are present, it is believed that HPV may stay in the body for life like the herpes, hepatitis, and human immunodeficiency viruses.

How are genital warts treated?

Because there is no cure for HPV infections, the purpose of treatment is to control outbreaks of warts.

There are several chemicals that can be applied directly to genital warts. Some are prescribed for use at home. Others may cause discomfort and must only be used under the careful supervision of a clinician. And some may not be used during pregnancy. Whenever these chemicals are used, the clinician's instructions must be followed exactly.

Genital warts also may be removed with cryotherapy (frozen off). They may be elector cauterized (burned off). Or they may be removed with surgery or with lasers.

Genital warts grow back again in at least 30% of the cases treated.

What is the connection between HPV, genital warts, and cervical cancer?

Some genital HPV infections are associated with cancers of the cervix, vulva, vagina, and penis. But the HPVs that cause genital warts do not seem to be directly associated with these cancers. However, since genital warts may accompany other genital HPV infections, many clinicians consider all such infections to be warnings of potentially cancerous conditions.

Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer in women worldwide.

In the US: About 15,000 new cases of cervical cancer are reported each year. About 7,000 women die of cervical cancer each year. Almost all women with cervical cancer test positive for HPV. Because cervical cancer alone is responsible for 15% of cancer deaths among women throughout the world, all HPV infections should be taken seriously. Pap tests can detect very early pre-cancerous conditions. All women, especially those who have had genital warts or other STDs, are urged to get a Pap test at least once a year.

Latest developments in preventing HPV:

The results of research on vaccines and condom use show great promise in preventing HPV and the resultant cervical cancers and genital warts. First, the Federal Drug Administration has approved the sale of Gardasil a vaccine that prevents the acquisition of the HPV types 6, 11, 16, and 18 that cause the majority of cervical cancers. The vaccine is now widely available and the Centers for Disease control has recommended that ***every woman between the ages of 11 and 26 receive this vaccine!*** However, there are two caveats. The vaccine is fairly expensive and requires 4 treatments spread out over several months to be effective. Further, it only protects against the 4 types of virus associated with cervical cancer. **This is where systematic condom use becomes important. Remember the statistic that within 5 years after becoming sexually active 80 percent of the women had contracted HPV? Well a study by University of Washington scientists and published in the New England Journal of Medicine reported that none of the women whose partners always used condoms had contracted HPV within three years of becoming sexually active. They have not yet reached the 5 year criterion but these results are very impressive and suggest that 100% condom use will protect you from all forms of HPV.**