



HUMAN PAPILOMA VIRUS (HPV/GENITAL WARTS)

What is the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)?

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is a very common viral infection spread by skin-to-skin sexual contact. HPV is a group of over 100 different strains or types. Over 30 of these are sexually transmitted, and they can infect the genital area — the skin of the penis, vulva, labia, or anus, or the tissues covering the vagina and cervix. Genital warts are single or multiple growths or bumps that appear in the genital area, and sometimes form a cauliflower-like shape.

How do people get genital HPV infections?

The types of HPV that infect the genital area are spread primarily through sexual contact. Since most HPV infections have no signs or symptoms, most infected persons are completely unaware they are infected. Persons infected with HPV can transmit the virus to a sex partner.

What are the signs and symptoms of genital HPV infection?

Some people with genital HPV infection get visible genital warts. Most people who have a genital HPV infection are asymptomatic and do not know they are infected.

What are genital warts?

Genital warts appear as single or soft, moist, pink or red swellings that appear in the genital area. They can be raised or flat, single or multiple, and small or large. Some genital warts form a cauliflower-like cluster. Warts can appear on the vulva, in or around the vagina or anus, on the cervix, and on the penis, scrotum, groin, or thigh. Warts can appear within several weeks after sexual contact with an infected person or they can take months to appear.

Who is at risk for genital HPV infection?

Anyone who has vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who has HPV is at risk for genital HPV infection, even if the person does not have signs or symptoms.

How is genital HPV infection diagnosed?

Most women are diagnosed with HPV when they receive abnormal Pap smears. Pap smears are the primary screening tool for cervical cancer or pre-cancerous conditions, many of which are cell changes related to HPV. Current HPV tests are fairly sophisticated and expensive and are commercially available for women with an abnormal Pap smear. The tests cannot identify which HPV infections will lead to cervical cancer or pre-cancerous conditions. Research is underway to determine the role of HPV tests for cervical cancer screening.

Office of Infectious Disease Epidemiology
24/7 Emergency Contact Number: 1-888-295-5156



How is genital HPV infection treated?

There is no cure for HPV infection, although in most women the infection goes away on its own within two years. But sometimes, HPV infections will last longer. Treatments provided by an OB/GYN or STD clinic are directed to the changes in the skin or mucous membrane caused by HPV infection, such as warts and pre-cancerous changes in the cervix.

What is the connection between HPV infection and cervical cancer?

All types of HPV can cause mild Pap test abnormalities which do not have serious consequences. In rare cases, approximately 10 of the 30 identified genital HPV types can cause cancers of the cervix (cervical cancer), vagina, and vulva in women. Research has shown that for approximately 90% of women, cervical HPV infection becomes undetectable within two years. Although only a small portion of women have persistent infection, persistent infection with high-risk types of HPV is the main risk factor for cervical cancer.

A Pap test can detect pre-cancerous and cancerous cells on the cervix. Regular Pap testing and careful medical follow-up, with treatment if necessary, can help ensure that pre-cancerous changes in the cervix caused by HPV infection do not develop into life-threatening cervical cancer.

How can genital HPV infection be prevented?

Vaccines are available to prevent genital HPV infection caused by certain types of HPV. HPV vaccination is recommended both girls and boys at ages 11 to 12 years but can be given starting at age 9 years.

The surest way to avoid transmission of sexually transmitted diseases is to abstain from sexual contact, or to be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected.

Latex or polyurethane male condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can reduce the risk of transmission of HPV, but cannot eliminate HPV transmission.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/hpv/parents/about-hpv.html>, 1-800-232-4636; TTY: 1-888-232-6348 In English and Spanish.