



# HPV

## Symptoms, Treatment, and Prevention



AMERICAN  
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### What Is HPV?

- Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a family of viruses that sometimes causes genital warts or pre-cancerous conditions. There are more than 150 types of HPV.
- About one-third of the types of HPV are sexually transmitted and can cause genital warts or cancer.
- The types of HPV that cause genital warts are called low-risk types. The types that cause cancer are called high-risk types.
- The likelihood of having or getting cancer from HPV is very small.

### How Is HPV Spread?

- HPV is spread through skin-to-skin contact.
- You can get HPV by having vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who has the virus, even when that person shows no signs or symptoms of having HPV. It can also be spread through hand-to-genital contact.
- HPV is very common; nearly all sexually active people get it at some point in their lives.

### How Do I Know if I Have HPV?

- Most people with HPV do not know they are infected.
- Some people find out they have HPV when they get genital warts. Warts are not always visible to the naked eye. They may look like small bumps or take on a fleshy, cauliflower-like appearance.
- Some people may find out they have HPV when they get an abnormal Pap test result during a cervical cancer screening (this screening is usually part of routine or preventive health care).

### How Is HPV Treated?

- HPV doesn't always require treatment. Both low-risk and high-risk HPV infections are usually cleared by the immune system within two years of acquiring them. During this time they are usually invisible and undetectable, but they are contagious.
- Genital warts can be treated in several ways. Talk to your health care provider about your options for removing the warts. Since these warts are caused by a virus they may reoccur even if treated, but having them removed may decrease discomfort and make it harder to give the virus to someone else.
- Treatment of cervical lesions, which are typically invisible to the naked eye, requires visiting a health care provider. If treatment is needed, the cervix is usually treated with cryotherapy, laser, or loop excision.
- After age 21, you should go to your health care provider for a Pap test. If mild cervical abnormalities are detected, you will be advised on the appropriate follow-up care.

### Can HPV Infections Be Cured?

HPV can be treated but not cured. Most people clear HPV virus from their bodies. For some, treatment is necessary. The goal is for the immune system to get rid of the virus. Maintaining a healthy immune system can help with this.

### How Can HPV Infections Be Prevented?

#### Practice Safer Sex

- Use internal or external condoms and/or dental dams every time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex, including with sex toys. Although many HPV infections and warts occur outside the area covered by a condom, practicing safer sex can lower your chances of getting HPV.
- Control your use of alcohol and other mood-altering drugs—they may cloud your ability to make safer decisions about sex.
- Because HPV is easily transmitted and most people don't know if they have it, partners need to accept that to be sexually active is to risk infection with HPV.

#### Have Regular Check-ups

- A lab test for high-risk HPV types may be recommended. This test is for examining cervical cells and hasn't been approved for other types of cells.
- If you have had receptive anal intercourse, discuss with your health care provider if screening for anal cancer is appropriate.
- HIV infection increases the chance than an HPV infection can progress to cancer at a later age. If you are living with HIV, it is important that you follow these recommendations.

#### Get Vaccinated with HPV Vaccine

- The HPV vaccine is a safe and effective vaccine that may prevent some of the most common strains of HPV and may prevent HPV-associated cancers and genital warts.
- The vaccine is recommended for all people ages 9 through 26. "Catch-up" vaccination is also recommended for people through age 26 who haven't been fully vaccinated (didn't receive the full vaccine series).
- The HPV vaccine is most effective if given before you become sexually active, but it can be given at any time.

#### Take Care of Your Body

- Keep your immune system healthy by eating a nutritious diet, getting enough sleep, managing stress, exercising regularly, avoiding tobacco, and drinking alcohol in moderation.
- You should also examine your genitals periodically to check for visible warts. If you notice any, contact your health care provider. Don't try to remove them yourself or use over-the-counter medications on them.

## Finding Support After an HPV Diagnosis

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 79 million Americans are currently infected with HPV. About 14 million people become newly infected each year. HPV is so common that most sexually-active people will get at least one type of HPV at some point in their lives.

If you are diagnosed with HPV infection, you may feel depressed, angry, guilty, or frustrated. Accepting the diagnosis and talking to your sexual partner(s) may be difficult, and having to get repeated treatments may be discouraging. But keep in mind that many people have the same feelings and concerns. Having HPV does not make you unclean or a bad person. In time, most people stop having recurrences or problems related to HPV infection. Speak with your health care provider about resources that can help you accept your diagnosis.

## For More Information

### CDC Information

800-CDC-INFO, 800-232-4636

TTY: 888-232-6348

In English en Español

[www.cdc.gov/std/hpv](http://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv)

### American Sexual Health Association

[www.ashasexualhealth.org/stdsstis/hpv](http://www.ashasexualhealth.org/stdsstis/hpv)

### American College Health Association

(410) 859-1500 | [www.acha.org](http://www.acha.org)

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