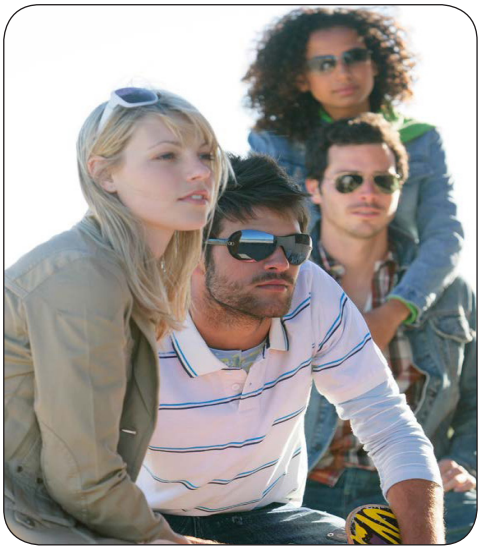
Genital HPV Infection – CDC Fact Sheet

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the United States. Some health effects caused by HPV can be prevented with vaccines.



What is HPV?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI). HPV is a different virus than HIV and HSV (herpes). HPV is so common that nearly all sexually active men and women get it at some point in their lives. There are many different types of HPV. Some types can cause health problems including genital warts and cancers. But there are vaccines that can stop these health problems from happening.

How is HPV spread?

You can get HPV by having oral, vaginal, or anal sex with someone who has the virus. It is most commonly spread during vaginal or anal sex. HPV can be passed even when an infected person has no signs or symptoms.

Anyone who is sexually active can get HPV, even if you have had sex with only one person. You also can develop symptoms years after you have sex with someone who is infected making it hard to know when you first became infected.

Does HPV cause health problems?

In most cases, HPV goes away on its own and does not cause any health problems. But when HPV does not go away, it can cause health problems like genital warts and cancer.

Genital warts usually appear as a small bump or group of bumps in the genital area. They can be small or large, raised or flat, or shaped like a cauliflower. A healthcare provider can usually diagnose warts by looking at the genital area.

Does HPV cause cancer?

HPV can cause cervical and other cancers including cancer of the vulva, vagina, penis, or anus. It can also cause cancer in the back of the throat, including the base of the tongue and tonsils (called oropharyngeal cancer).

Cancer often takes years, even decades, to develop after a person gets HPV. The types of HPV that can cause genital warts are not the same as the types of HPV that can cause cancers.

There is no way to know which people who have HPV will develop cancer or other health problems. People with weak immune systems may be less able to fight off HPV and more likely to develop health problems from it, this includes people with HIV/AIDS.

How can I avoid HPV and the health problems it can cause?

You can do several things to lower your chances of getting HPV.

Get vaccinated. HPV vaccines are safe and effective. They can protect males and females against diseases (including cancers) caused by HPV when given in the recommended age groups (see "Who should get vaccinated?" below). HPV vaccines are given in three shots over six months; it is important to get all three doses.

Get screened for cervical cancer. Routine screening for women aged 21 to 65 years old can prevent cervical cancer.

If you are sexually active

- Use latex condoms the right way every time you have sex. This can lower your chances of getting HPV. But HPV can infect areas that are

not covered by a condom - so condoms may not give full protection against getting HPV;

- Be in a mutually monogamous relationship – or have sex only with someone who only has sex with you.

Who should get vaccinated?

All boys and girls ages 11 or 12 years should get vaccinated.

Catch-up vaccines are recommended for males through age 21 and for females through age 26, if they did not get vaccinated when they were younger.

The vaccine is also recommended for gay and bisexual men (or any man who has sex with a man) through age 26. It is also recommended for men and women with compromised immune systems (including people living with HIV/AIDS) through age 26, if they did not get fully vaccinated when they were younger.

How do I know if I have HPV?

There is no test to find out a person's "HPV status." Also, there is no approved HPV test to find HPV in the mouth or throat.

There are HPV tests that can be used to screen for cervical cancer. These tests are recommended for screening only in women aged 30 years and older. They are not recommended to screen men, adolescents, or women under the age of 30 years.

Most people with HPV do not know they are infected and never develop symptoms or health problems from it. Some people find out they have HPV when they get genital warts. Women may find out they have HPV when they get an abnormal Pap test result (during cervical cancer screening). Others may only find out once they've developed more serious problems from HPV, such as cancers.

How common is HPV and the health problems caused by HPV?

HPV (the virus): 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 men and women will get at least one type of HPV at some point in their lives.

Health problems related to HPV include genital warts and cervical cancer.

Genital warts: About 360,000 people in the United States get genital warts each year.

Cervical cancer: More than 10,000 women in the United States get cervical cancer each year.

There are other conditions and cancers caused by HPV that occur in persons living in the United States.

Each year, about 21,000 of HPV-related cancers could be prevented by getting the HPV vaccine.

I'm pregnant. Will having HPV affect my pregnancy?

If you are pregnant and have HPV, you can get genital warts or develop abnormal cell changes on your cervix. Abnormal cell changes can be found with routine cervical cancer screening. You should get routine cervical cancer screening even when you are pregnant.

Can I be treated for HPV or health problems caused by HPV?

There is no treatment for the virus itself. However, there are treatments for the health problems that HPV can cause:

1. Genital warts can be treated by you or your physician. If left untreated, genital warts may go away, stay the same, or grow in size or number.
2. Cervical precancer can be treated. Women who get routine Pap tests and follow up as needed can identify problems before cancer develops. Prevention is always better than treatment. For more information visit www.cancer.org.
3. Other HPV-related cancers are also more treatable when diagnosed and treated early. For more information visit www.cancer.org.

Where can I get more information?

STD information
http://www.cdc.gov/std/

HPV Information
http://www.cdc.gov/hpv/

HPV Vaccination
http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/hpv/

Cancer Information
http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/

Cervical Cancer Screening
http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/basic_info/screening.htm

CDC's National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program
http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp/

CDC-INFO Contact Center
1-800-CDC-INFO
(1-800-232-4636)
Contact www.cdc.gov/info

CDC National Prevention Information Network (NPIN)
https://npin.cdc.gov/disease/stds
P.O. Box 6003
Rockville, MD 20849-6003
E-mail: npin-info@cdc.gov

National HPV and Cervical Cancer Prevention Resource Center
American Sexual Health Association (ASHA)
http://www.ashastd.org/std-sti/hpv.html
P.O. Box 13827
Research Triangle Park,
NC 27709-3827
1-800-783-9877