

HUMAN PAPILLOMA VIRUS (HPV)

WHAT IS HPV?

HPV is a very common sexually transmitted infection (STI). About 75 per cent of people who have been sexually active have been exposed to HPV at some time in their life. There are over 100 strains of HPV of which 30 to 40 strains can infect the anogenital tract.

Some strains of HPV can cause genital warts and other strains of HPV can cause genital, anal, oropharyngeal (throat) cancers, and some can cause cervical cancer.

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the world today.

SYMPTOMS

A person can be infected with HPV without any symptoms or very few symptoms for months or even years, but still may be able to pass the infection on to a sexual partner.

Genital warts are caused by about 40 types of HPV. Genital warts are a symptom of HPV infection. Warts can vary in colour and shape but are usually flesh-coloured. They can be flat or raised and may be found alone or in clusters.

Certain strains of HPV may cause changes in the cells of the cervix that can lead to cervical cancer. These changes can be detected through regular Pap testing.

HOW IT SPREADS

HPV spreads through sexual activity via intimate skin-to-skin contact in the genital area with an infected partner. The virus can be found in and around the genital area including: the vagina and vaginal wall, the vulva, cervix, penis, and anus. Shaving the genital area can promote the spread of genital warts. HPV infections can reoccur.

DIAGNOSIS

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

There are HPV tests that can screen for cervical cancer. Healthcare providers use these tests for screening persons with a cervix that are at risk.

Most people with HPV do not know they have the infection. They do not develop symptoms or health problems. Many people find out they have HPV when they get genital warts. Most genital warts are diagnosed by visual inspection. If there is any doubt, a biopsy can be taken.

Persons with a cervix may find out they have HPV when they get an abnormal Pap test result (during cervical cancer screening).

Other people may find out once they develop more serious problems from HPV, such as cancers.

TREATMENT

There is no treatment for the virus itself and there is no cure for HPV, but the body's immune system will often fight off HPV infection.

Treatment is available for the health problems that HPV can cause:

- Genital warts can go away with treatment from your healthcare provider or with prescription medicine; if left untreated, genital warts may go away, stay the same, or grow and/or increase in number
- Cervical precancer treatment is available; people who get routine Pap tests and follow up as needed can find problems before cancer develops – prevention is always better than treatment
- Other HPV-related cancers are also more treatable when found and treated early

PREVENTION

Get vaccinated! The HPV Gardasil 9 vaccine is safe and effective. It can protect against diseases (including cancers) caused by HPV. Gardasil 9 is more effective if administered prior to any sexual activity which is why this vaccine is offered free of charge to students in Grade 7 in Ontario as part of the school vaccination program.

Speak with your healthcare provider about your risk for new HPV infections and the possible vaccine benefits. Nearly all sexually active adults have already been exposed to HPV, although not necessarily all the HPV types targeted by vaccination

Get screened for cervical cancer. Routine PAP screening for persons 25 and over can prevent cervical cancer.

IF YOU ARE SEXUALLY ACTIVE

- Use a condom every time you have sex; this can lower your chances of getting HPV however, HPV can infect areas the condom does not cover
- Be in a mutually monogamous relationship – or have sex only with someone who only has sex with you

At any age, having a new sex partner is a risk factor for getting a new HPV infection. People who are already in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship are not likely to get a new HPV infection.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- sexandu.ca
- York Region Public Health Sexual Health Clinics **1-800-361-5653, # 1**