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What you need to know about cervical cancer, genital warts, and HPV

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What is HPV?

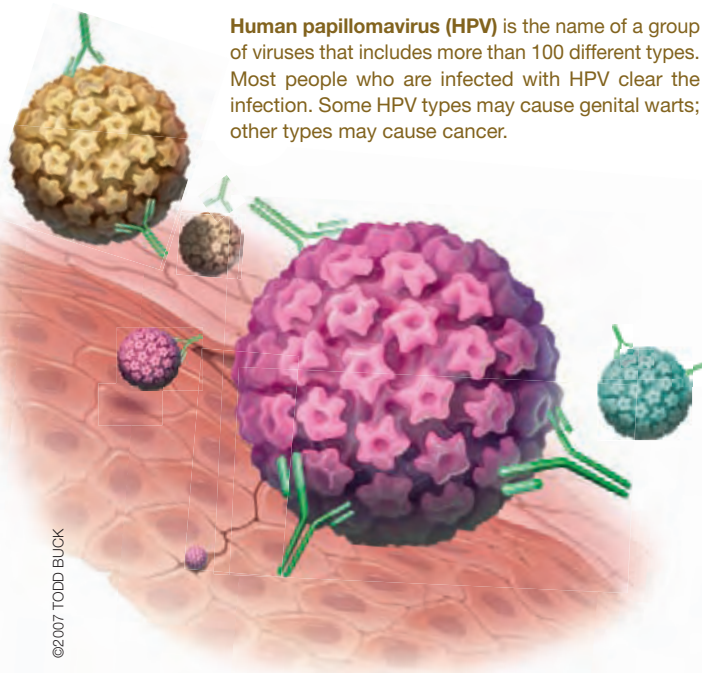
HPV is the abbreviation for a common virus called human papillomavirus. There are more than 100 types of HPV. Most of them are relatively harmless, like the ones that cause common warts on hands and feet.

For most people, HPV infections have no signs or symptoms and go away on their own. However, some women do not clear their HPV infection but develop changes in their cervix that may eventually lead to cervical cancer.

About 30 types of HPV affect the genital area. Some are cancer causing and some are not.

About 70% of cervical cancer cases are caused by only 2 of the 15 cancer-causing types of HPV. These 2 are called HPV 16 and HPV 18.

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the name of a group of viruses that includes more than 100 different types. Most people who are infected with HPV clear the infection. Some HPV types may cause genital warts; other types may cause cancer.



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Some HPV types don't cause cancer but can cause warts on the male and female genitals. The 2 types that cause 90% of genital warts are called HPV 6 and HPV 11.

How common is HPV?

About 1 in 4 girls and women between the ages of 14 and 59 has HPV.

Over a lifetime, about 8 in 10 women will have at least one HPV infection.

How is HPV transmitted?

HPV is easily transmitted, so any exposure puts you at risk.

HPV is spread through intimate, skin-to-skin contact, usually from the genitals of one partner to the genitals of the other partner.

Because HPV is common, many women get HPV from their first sexual exposure. The more partners you have, the greater the likelihood that you'll have one or more HPV infection in your lifetime.

The only way you can totally protect yourself against HPV is to avoid any sexual activity that involves genital contact.

Condoms offer some protection from genital HPV and, usually, protection against HIV and some other sexually transmitted infections.

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is cancer of the cervix (the lower part of the uterus or the womb that connects to the vagina).

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Cervical cancer is not considered to be hereditary. It is caused by certain types of HPV when the body does not clear the infection. Abnormal cells that develop in the lining of the cervix can become precancerous and progress to cancer if they are not detected and treated.

How can you prevent cervical cancer?

Pap tests (also known as Pap smears) are the best way to protect yourself from cervical cancer. A Pap test looks for abnormal cells on the lining of the cervix. That way, they can be treated many years before they can become cancer.

About 3 years after becoming sexually active and no later than age 21, girls and women should have an annual gynecologic exam and a first screening for cervical cancer.

To perform a Pap test, your healthcare professional takes a small sample of cells by swabbing the cervix and sends the collected cells to a laboratory for evaluation.

If your Pap test is abnormal, your healthcare professional may suggest repeated Pap tests or a colposcopy (an examination of the cervix using a magnifying lens).

Another screening option for women age 30 and older is to do both a Pap test and an HPV test. If both are normal, they do not need to be repeated for 3 years, although women should continue to have a yearly health exam.

What are genital warts?

Genital warts aren't life threatening, but they can be life altering. Genital warts are caused by certain types of HPV. The types of HPV that cause genital warts are different from the types of HPV that can cause cervical cancer.

What do genital warts look like?

A genital wart may be a whitish or flesh-colored bump on the skin. It may be raised or flat, cauliflower-shaped, small or large. There may be only one, or there may be many, spread as single warts or in groups.

Warts may appear on the vulva (the outer genital area that surrounds the opening of the vagina), on the skin between the opening of the vagina and the anus, in or around the anus, in or around the vagina, or on the cervix.

How long do genital warts last?

How long genital warts last depends mostly on how fast your immune system recognizes HPV and responds to clear it from your body. This is usually faster when your healthcare professional treats the warts. However, treatment may still take several weeks and sometimes several months. When genital warts are present, the HPV virus that caused them is considered

“active.” However, you may be contagious even without obvious genital warts. Even after treatment, there is always the chance that genital warts could return because HPV still may be present.

When do genital warts appear?

Genital warts may appear within a few weeks after sexual contact with an infected partner, or they may take many weeks or months to appear. Occasionally, they may not appear for years. As a result, it's hard to know when the infection occurred.

Do genital warts have any symptoms?

Most people experience only the bumps on the genitals. Occasionally, the warts may cause mild itching and burning. Because of their physical appearance, genital warts can sometimes make people feel anxious or embarrassed.

Your healthcare professional may recommend any of the following treatments for genital warts:

- Prescription creams (Note: over-the-counter wart treatments are ineffective on genital warts)
- Trichloroacetic acid applied to the surface of the genital warts
- Cryotherapy: liquid nitrogen to freeze the genital warts, which then fall off the skin
- Office procedures that are usually performed under anesthesia to lessen pain include cutting off the warts, electrocautery (an electrical current that burns off the warts), or laser therapy (an intense light, which destroys genital warts and is used when other methods haven't removed the warts).

Things to remember

- Cervical cancer is caused by certain types of HPV.
- Other types of HPV can cause genital warts.
- Because HPV often has no signs or symptoms, many people don't know they have it.
- For most people, the body's own defense system will clear the virus. But for some women who do not clear the HPV infection, cervical cancer can develop.

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