

HPV - Human Papilloma Virus

WHAT IS IT?

HPV is a very common virus. Most people (up to 70%) will have HPV at some time in their lives. There are over 100 different types. Over 30 types infect the genital area. These are divided into “high-risk” and “low-risk” types. Low-risk types can cause genital warts, also known as “condyloma”. Approximately 13 high-risk types can cause cervical or anal cancer. Most HPV infections don’t cause any symptoms and go away on their own with a good immune system.

HOW IS IT SPREAD?

HPV is most commonly spread during sexual activity by skin to skin contact (genitals or anus) either by direct contact with warts, or with the area infected with the virus. It is rarely passed through oral sex. It is not clear if it can be spread through contact with fingers or other objects that have been in contact with the virus. There is no medical cure for HPV infection, but both warts and precancerous changes can be treated.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Warts

If a person gets infected with the HPV types that cause warts, anywhere from two months to two years later, one or more warts may appear. They do not all look the same: some may look fleshy or cauliflower-like; others may look like small hard spots or tags. Some warts are not visible to the naked eye. Warts can appear in the genital, vaginal or anal area and rarely, on or in the mouth. Sometimes, they cause itching, vaginal or rectal bleeding.

No symptoms

Both men and women could have HPV on their genitals and/or their anus and have no symptoms. They can pass it on without knowing it.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

Warts

There is no specific test for warts when there are no visible symptoms. However, if the warts are visible, a doctor can tell if you have genital warts by examining them.

If a doctor suspects there are warts inside a man’s urethra, they will order a test called a urethroscopy and/or cystoscopy. During this test the doctor will be able to see inside the urethra and up into the bladder.

When women have their annual Pap test (taking a sample of cells from the cervix), changes in the cells and/or HPV can be detected. Many of these changes will be followed by more frequent Pap testing and will get better on their own. However, some abnormal cells do not get better or are considered more serious. These require a test called a colposcopy. A colposcopy uses a special magnifying microscope to “see” the cells of the cervix and upper vagina. Any types of cell changes that do not get better on their own need treatment.

WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS?

In women, high-risk types of HPV can cause cervical cell changes that may lead to cervical cancer. 90% of cervical cancer is preventable by having a regular Pap test and treating abnormal cells when necessary.

In men, high-risk types of HPV may lead to cancer of the penis; but this is rare.

In men and women HPV infection can put you at risk for anal cancer.

HOW IS HPV TREATED?

Warts can be removed in several ways: freezing with liquid nitrogen, applying a medicated liquid or sometimes removed with surgery. High-grade lesions on the cervix can be treated with laser or freezing. Often, abnormal cells on the cervix go back to normal on their own.

CAN IT BE CURED?

There is no medical cure for HPV; usually a person's immune system clears the virus from his or her body.

WHAT ABOUT SEXUAL PARTNERS?

If you think you have genital warts, or a doctor has told you that you have HPV, tell your partner. They can go and get checked at a doctor's office or at a clinic. After treatment for warts, you may still be able to pass on the virus. Condoms are good protection for the parts of the genitals that are covered. However, you can pass on the virus from the parts of the body (for example scrotum, pubic area etc.) that are not covered by a condom. If you have not had symptoms for one to two years, your body has probably cleared the infection.

The only way to prevent HPV is to avoid direct contact with the virus. If warts are visible in the genital area, avoid skin to skin contact. If you choose to shave or wax your genitals, you are at higher risk of getting infected with HPV for 48 hours afterwards.

IS FOLLOW-UP IMPORTANT?

YES. Treatment for genital warts is recommended until there are no more visible warts.

All women who have become sexually active should have a regular Pap test. Women who have had HPV on their Pap test results should be tested as frequently as their health care provider recommends.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

**Call the AIDS and Sexual Health InfoLine at 416-392-2437
or go to
www.toronto.ca/health**

SAFER SEX

To reduce your risk of getting a sexually transmitted disease (STD), use a condom or other barrier every time you have genital contact, vaginal, anal or oral sex.