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HPV (Human Papilloma Virus)

Genital Warts, Cervical Cancer (read carefully)

Information here is general in nature. You should always consult a health professional for health problems.

HPV is a large group of viruses, some of which are dangerous and some of which are nuisance. It's a complicated set of viruses so you should definitely talk to your doctor if you have been or think you may have been exposed to HPV. There are various treatment options for genital warts (or other warts) and vaginal and/or anal pap smears may detect cancer.

Things to know:

HPV is actually the name of a large group - around 100 - viruses that infect skin. About 30 can be passed on sexually. Some cause warts. Some others can cause cancer.

Between 4 and 6 million people in the U.S.A. alone get genital HPV each year. About 30 can cause a genital infection which can be passed on sexually. Many will never be detected and will not cause problems. But some can cause big problems! Those HPV viruses can then cause genital warts and abnormal cell changes in a woman's cervix.

Most people who are infected do not know it! HPV often shows no symptoms so many people have no clue that they've gotten an infection.

HPV can linger in the body and there may be no symptoms showing. Many people with a healthy immune system can "clear" an HPV infection, that is, symptoms, on their own but some people will have the virus all their lives. <http://www.talksexwithsue.com/warts.html>. The [New York State Dept. of Health](#) states "HPV is a chronic, lifelong infection. However, as many as one out of every three people with genital warts find that they go away on their own - usually within two years."

High risk and Low Risk:

"High risk" HPV infections can cause cancers. "Low risk" HPV infections can cause warts but not cancers. Remember, we are dealing with a group of about 30 different viruses. In either case, most healthy people can clear out the infection naturally in months or up to two years (Centers for Disease Control)

HPV-caused cancers in men are rare.

If you have visible genital warts, sometimes ointments are available to treat those symptoms. Your doctor may also be able to use cryogenic or chemical ways to "burn off" warts. Your body may retain the virus while still suppressing warts. If your immune system cannot control the virus, it can lead to recurring outbreaks of genital warts- and you may be "contagious" even if you don't see any warts during an outbreak. As well, if a woman cannot clear a "high risk: HPV virus, she may go on to develop cervical cancer years later.

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Risk of transmitting HPV to a baby during birth is low. In those rare cases, the baby can develop warts on her or his voice box. There is no apparent link between HPV and miscarriage, premature births or other pregnancy related problems.

According to the American Social Health Association, about 80% of all sexually active people have been infected at some point in their lives. But most healthy immune systems can suppress HPV within a few months. Some HPV viruses are called high-risk types because they are linked to cervical cancer and other types of cancer. However, while it can cause cervical cancer, the percentage of women who are infected with high risk HPV and who do go on to develop cervical cancer, is low. Having said that, cervical cancer can be fatal if not caught early. Regular Pap smears can prevent or diagnose cervical cancer in its early stages so it can be treated and cured. Finding it early is critical so please get a Pap smear as often as is recommended by your doctor.

How you get HPV:

Genital HPV is usually gotten through sexual contact, usually through vaginal or anal sex; remember, it is a skin-to-skin disease. Most infected people do not realise they have it or that they are passing it on to their partner.

SYMPTOMS:

There are seldom noticeable symptoms of HPV, though some types can cause genital warts in either sex.

Genital warts appear as small bumps or clusters of bumps in the genital area. According to the [CDC](http://www.cdc.gov) (Centers for Disease Control), they can be raised or flat, single or grouped, small or large and sometimes they are "cauliflower shaped". The places they tend to appear are the location of contact. This can be in or around the vagina or the anus, on the cervix (inside the woman), on the penis, scrotum (the "bag" that holds the testicles) or anywhere in the groin area or thigh. Warts can appear within weeks or months after sexual contact. They might disappear, or not change or increase in size and/or number. Even if the warts disappear temporarily, sometimes you may still pass on the virus.

Some HPV infections can cause cancer of the cervix (cervical cancer) and in rare cases, cancer of the vulva (outer female genitals), vagina, penis and anus.

The types of HPV that cause genital warts are not the same ones that cause cancers.

PREVENTION

Prevention: There are two obvious ways to avoid getting infected. Abstinence (no sexual contact) and staying away from sexual partners who have an HPV infection. But since it is nearly impossible to tell if someone has an infection, unless they happen to have been infected with only a wart-causing strain of HPV *and* they happen to be showing signs of warts, *and* you happen to notice the warts....well there is one way to significantly improve your odds of avoiding infection. Have a long term, monogamous

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relationship. That is, two people are sexually active only with each other so neither one can "introduce" any viruses or bacteria into the relationship. "Hi Sandy! I'd like you to meet Human Papilloma Virus. HPV, meet, Sandy".

Condoms: Condoms may be *helpful* in avoiding HPV. They are certainly better than nothing. However, not all of a potentially infected area is covered by a condom, so you cannot count on a condom to protect you from HPV.

Vaccine: There is a fairly new and somewhat controversial vaccine called **Gardasil**. It blocks two types of cervical cancer causing HPV viruses and two types of wart causing HPV virus. The controversy comes from some people's belief that the vaccine is far too expensive and that the manufacturer has created a vaccine that most females do not need to have injected (there are always some risks with vaccines). Critics say that it is unnecessary to spend enormous amounts of money on vaccinating millions of girls and women aged 14 to 26 years with Gardasil because only a small number of those who get the high risk HPV virus will develop cervical cancer. Gardasil doesn't prevent them all. There are also other vaccines on the way. (A little more information below in "Treatment") There are, as well, critics of the potential side effects of the vaccine, some of which can be severe.

If you are a female in the 14 to 26 year group you may want to consider Gardasil. But do research on it and talk to your doctor or gynecologist. Get as many facts as you can and weigh them out. There is a lot of money to be made by the pharmaceutical company selling Gardasil as well as competitors who are coming to the market. It's an important decision for you and only you can decide what is right for you. Here is some information about Gardasil. Here's is an [article](#) that shows a bit more about the [controversy](#). If you do an Internet search you will find plenty of fact and opinion.

Getting tested: There is no general test for HPV. There is a DNA test called the Hybrid Capture II (HCII) that can *detect the types of HPV that are linked with cervical cancer*. (Source: [Canadian Women's Health Network](#))

Most healthy people's immune system will clear it out in under two years. Testing should routinely be done in sexually active girls and women for changes in the cervical cells. The "Pap smear" test should be done at intervals recommended by your doctor. It may be more or less frequent, depending on your age, other health factors including nutrition and smoking, and whether there is a history of cervical cancer in your family.

Pre-cancer/cancer of the Cervix:

Regular screening for females with a Pap smear or follow-up DNA tests can catch cervical cancer in its early stages when treatment is most effective. (Men or women who engage in anal sex should also consider Pap tests from the anus.) Since cervical cancer tends to develop over several years, regular screening with these tests can save many women's lives. According to the Centers for Disease Control, "Pap tests can detect abnormal, pre-cancerous or cancerous cell changes in the cervix, but cannot directly diagnose HPV. Specialized DNA tests can diagnose HPV in the cervix. These DNA tests are

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routinely used to clarify Pap test results that are unclear. They are also approved for primary screening in women over 30 (in combination with conventional Pap testing).

Genital Warts:

Visual inspection can be done for most genital warts. Sometimes doctors will use a mild solution to locate hard to see flat genital warts.

TREATMENT:

Genital warts- or at least their symptoms - can be treated with ointments that are applied by the person with the infection, as well as at clinics. Eventually many people will clear it with their immune system commonly taking up to two years. But not everyone is that lucky. Some warts can also be removed by cryogenic (freezing), chemical or laser treatments. Your doctor needs to be consulted about treatments.

According to HPVinfo.ca "A new product, imiquimod cream (Aldara) is now available and has some success at stimulating the immune system to fight the virus when it causes external genital and anal warts."

For HPV viruses that cause cervical cancer you might want to consider Gardasil vaccine as a preventative for some genital warts or for some cervical cancer causing strains of the HPV virus. Gardasil cannot "cure" HPV but might *prevent* women from contracting an HPV virus that can lead to cancer. However, Gardasil doesn't stop all HPV viruses- only two high risk and two low risk types. There is another vaccine on the way from Gardasil's manufacturer to tackle more HPV viruses and at least one competing drug company is working on a [similar product](#). (GlaxoSmithKline's "Cervarix" is not yet approved in North America though it may be available in the European Union and Australia.)

If you are a woman, get regular Pap smears. Cervical cancer (or any of the more rare types of HPV caused cancers), when diagnosed early through Pap smears has a high rate of cure. Found too late...no.

[Images of Genital Warts](#). **Warning:** These images are explicit photographs of genitals infected by HPV which caused "Genital Warts", and may disturb some people.