

HPV: Human Papilloma Virus & Genital Warts

What is HPV?

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is a common infection of the genital and anal area. There are several different types of HPV and some of these can cause genital warts, so HPV is often called the wart virus.

HPV can also cause changes in the cells of a woman's cervix: this is the reason pap smears are performed (see below).

General information

HPV is very common and affects between 8% - 25% of the sexually active population at any one time. By the time a person is in their 50s-60s, there is an 80% chance they will have had HPV at some stage. HPV is so common, it is virtually synonymous with having sex.

The viruses are very similar to ordinary warts that infect hands and feet, but these particular types of viruses almost exclusively infect the genital and anal area.

How do I know if I've been infected?

People's bodies react differently to infection with HPV; most will not know they are infected, as they have no symptoms. They may pass the infection on to someone else, who may react differently and develop visible warts. Women may also develop abnormalities in the cells of the cervix. Men who have sex with men can also be infected with HPV and develop visible warts.

Warts

Visible warts may have the appearance of cauliflower shaped lumps. They may be tiny and very few in number, but occasionally are large and quite wide spread. They may also have a flat appearance and be difficult to detect. The time between catching the virus and having warts is variable, generally 3 -12 weeks. Some people may take a year or more to develop symptoms.

Pap Smears and HPV

HPV is the most common cause of pap smear abnormalities. Having a pap smear showing HPV is nothing to worry about in itself. Your body may be able to clear its infection with HPV, and then your pap smear will return to normal. This is why the doctor or nurse will sometimes tell you that the smear is to be repeated earlier than usual, but also reassure you that treatment is not needed at this time.

However, HPV may also cause what is called dysplasia. Dysplasia is a change to the superficial (surface) cells that line the cervix. Most dysplasia if left alone will change back to normal, however, a very small percentage will become cancerous if left untreated for many years. For this reason, dysplasia is sometimes referred to as pre cancer of the cervix. However, this term is misleading because dysplasia is not cancer. Pap smear abnormalities are now recorded as 'low or high grade abnormalities'.

The particular viruses within the family that cause more serious abnormalities don't tend to cause visible warts, so an abnormal smear is often quite a surprise to the woman, as she has no symptoms. Conversely, the viruses in the family that cause visible warts don't tend to cause serious abnormalities in the cervix.

Once a woman has HPV abnormalities on her pap smear, she needs careful follow up so any changes can be monitored.

If the pap smear shows persistent abnormalities, a further examination called a colposcopy will be recommended. This involves looking at the cervix with a magnifying instrument. An expert in colposcopy performs this procedure, so a referral is necessary to one of these doctors.

Sometimes a small piece of tissue (a biopsy) is taken for further examination. If this confirms dysplasia, a treatment will be recommended to remove the abnormal cells; this will prevent the development of cancer in nearly all women. It is a very safe treatment and should not affect a woman's ability to have children.

How is the virus spread?

Generally HPV is passed on by the close skin to skin contact involved in sex. Barriers such as condoms and 'dental' dams give the best protection, but as HPV usually infects a large area of skin, total protection cannot be guaranteed.

Treatment of warts

There is no treatment that will rid the body of the virus. Warts, however, can be treated with a variety of regimes including paint, cream, laser and freezing. Prescribed paint or cream can be used at home for self-treatment of the warts, but needs careful medical monitoring. Treatment is usually quite effective but a number of treatments may be needed. It is not uncommon for the warts to come back. The body usually rids itself of the virus over a period of a few months to a few years.

If you have unprotected sex with your partner, and one of you is then diagnosed with HPV, there is a high chance that you are now both infected, even though only one of you may have symptoms. In this situation, starting to use protection may be of no use. However, condoms and 'dental' dams are your best protection against spreading STIs.

Pregnancy and HPV

Having HPV will not interfere with a woman becoming pregnant. However, genital warts may reappear, increase in size or number, or occur for the first time during pregnancy.

Very occasionally HPV can be passed on to the baby at birth. As far as is currently known, this rarely causes any harm to the baby.

Can HPV be cured?

HPV, in most cases, is dealt with by the body's immune system. This may take a number of years. Smoking can significantly prolong the time the virus is in the body and increase a woman's chances of dysplasia.

The most important thing is to protect yourself during sex by the use of barrier protection eg condoms, female condoms and dams. A dam is a thin latex sheet placed over (any part of) the body for safer oral sex.

Vaccine

In August 2006, a vaccine to prevent HPV infection will be available. This aims to reduce the rates of HPV infections and therefore cervical cancer, in the future. Until there is widespread vaccination of women, it is still very important to have regular pap smears and to seek advice regarding HPV and warts, where appropriate.



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