



## HUMAN PAPILOMA VIRUS (HPV/GENITAL WARTS)

### What is the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)?

Human papilloma virus, or HPV, is a viral infection spread by skin to skin sexual contact. HPV is a group of over 100 different strains or types. Over 30 of these are sexually transmitted, and they can infect the genital area, like the skin of the penis, vulva, labia, or anus, or the tissues covering the vagina and cervix. Genital warts are single or multiple growths or bumps that appear in the genital area, and sometimes form a cauliflower-like shape.

### How do people get genital HPV infections?

The types of HPV that infect the genital area are spread primarily through sexual contact. Most HPV infections have no signs or symptoms; therefore, most infected persons are completely unaware they are infected. Persons infected with HPV can transmit the virus to a sex partner.

### What are the signs and symptoms of genital HPV infection?

Some but not all people with genital HPV infection get visible genital warts. Most people who have a genital HPV infection are symptom-less and do not know they are infected.

### What are genital warts?

Genital warts appear as single or soft, moist, pink or red swellings that appear in the genital area. They can be raised or flat, single or multiple, small or large. Some cluster, forming a cauliflower-like shape. Warts can appear on the vulva, in or around the vagina or anus, on the cervix, and on the penis, scrotum, groin or thigh. Warts can appear within several weeks after sexual contact with an infected person, or they can take months to appear.

### Who is at risk for genital HPV infection?

Anyone who has sex is at risk for genital HPV infection.

### How is genital HPV infection diagnosed?

Most women are diagnosed with HPV on the basis of abnormal Pap smears. Pap smears are the primary screening tool for cervical cancer or pre-cancerous conditions, many of which are cell changes related to HPV. Current HPV tests are fairly sophisticated and expensive and are commercially available for women with an abnormal Pap smear. They cannot identify which HPV infections will lead to cervical cancer or pre-cancerous conditions. Research is underway to determine the role of HPV tests for cervical cancer screening.



## **How is genital HPV infection treated?**

There is no "cure" for HPV infection, although in most women the infection goes away on its own. The treatments provided are directed to the changes in the skin or mucous membrane caused by HPV infection, such as warts and pre-cancerous changes in the cervix.

## **What is the connection between HPV infection and cervical cancer?**

All types of HPV can cause mild Pap test abnormalities which do not have serious consequences. Approximately 10 of the 30 identified genital HPV types can lead, in rare cases, to development of cervical cancer. Research has shown that for most women (90 percent), cervical HPV infection becomes undetectable within two years. Although only a small proportion of women have persistent infection, persistent infection with "high-risk" types of HPV is the main risk factor for cervical cancer.

A Pap test can detect pre-cancerous and cancerous cells on the cervix. Regular Pap testing and careful medical follow-up, with treatment if necessary, can help ensure that pre-cancerous changes in the cervix caused by HPV infection do not develop into life-threatening cervical cancer.

## **How can genital HPV infection be prevented?**

There are vaccines available to prevent the condition for certain types of HPV. The vaccine is recommended for both girls and boys.

The surest way to avoid transmission of sexually transmitted diseases is to abstain from sexual contact, or to be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected.

Latex or polyurethane male condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can reduce the risk of transmission of HPV, but cannot eliminate HPV transmission.

**For more information:** Call the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at 1-800-232-4636, TTY: 1-888-232-6348 In English and Spanish.