

Human Papilloma Virus

The Facts About Human Papilloma Virus

What is HPV?

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is a virus that infects the skin and mucous membranes (tissues that line the mouth, cervix, vagina, urethra and anus) of humans. Of the more than 100 strains of HPV, approximately 30 cause genital infections.¹

How many people have HPV?

Five to six million Americans become infected with genital HPV every year.² Twenty million Americans are currently infected with the virus, and another 80 million have been infected at some time in the past. This means that 75 percent of sexually active Americans are or have previously been infected.³

How does someone get HPV?

HPV is primarily spread by skin-to-skin contact with an infected person or by contact with body fluids contaminated with the virus. This means that most cases of genital HPV are acquired through sexual intercourse. Transmission of HPV via oral sex⁴, genital touching⁵ and via inanimate objects⁶ may also be possible, but the risk of infection from these activities has not been well documented.

What are the symptoms?

Most patients with HPV infection have no symptoms. Approximately 1 percent of all individuals who have been infected with HPV and 7 percent of those with current HPV infection have genital warts.⁷

How does someone find out s(he) has HPV?

Most people who are infected with HPV have no visible signs of infection. Since testing for HPV infection is not performed routinely, most infected women discover their infection when abnormalities are detected on a Pap smear. Most asymptomatic men do not know they are infected.

How is HPV treated?

HPV infection is not curable, although most HPV infections resolve spontaneously.⁸ Individuals with genital warts typically undergo treatment with topical medications applied to the wart in the physician's office or at home. Such medications may cause the warts to decrease in size or disappear. Even if warts do resolve, infection may remain, and can still be passed on to a future sexual partner. In addition, warts frequently recur in the months following treatment.

What are some of the long-term effects of HPV infection?

Annually, 2.5 million women experience an abnormal Pap smear in the United States, with a majority of these due to HPV infection.⁹ Untreated cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (the "pre-cancer" that typically causes abnormal Pap smears) can develop into cervical cancer. In fact, cervical cancer occurs

in approximately 13,000 women every year in the United States, and kills almost 5,000 American women yearly.¹⁰ HPV is the primary cause of over 99 percent of cervical cancers.^{11,12}

HPV is also associated with a number of other cancers, including oral, vaginal, vulvar, penile and anal cancer.¹³⁻¹⁹

How can I avoid getting HPV?

Since HPV is spread by skin-to-skin contact, and condoms do not cover the entire genital area, condoms are likely to be less effective in reducing the risk of HPV transmission than with other sexually transmitted infections.²⁰ A few studies have shown that condoms may partially reduce the transmission in men, but their effectiveness has not been demonstrated for women.²¹ Since HPV is so common among sexually active individuals, those who become sexually active outside of marriage are likely to be infected by the virus even if they use condoms. Women should receive regular Pap smears for early detection of cervical abnormalities like cervical cancer.

If you have already been sexually active outside a lifelong mutually faithful relationship (as in marriage), talk to your healthcare provider about getting you and your partner tested for STDs. Abstinence from sexual activity—including oral sex—or lifetime faithfulness to one uninfected partner is the only certain way to avoid being infected sexually.

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