

What Is Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI). Almost all sexually active people of all genders get it at some point in their lives. It spreads through skin-to-skin contact, usually during vaginal, oral, or anal sex. It can be spread even when an infected person shows no signs or symptoms.



HPV Can Cause Health Problems

Most HPV infections go away on their own and cause no issues. But others can stay in the body. These types of HPV can lead to health problems:

- **Genital warts** that may be small, large, raised, flat, or shaped like cauliflower. They can be treated to reduce symptoms. If not treated, the warts may go away, stay the same, or grow in size or number. The types of HPV that cause genital warts are not the same ones that can cause cancer.
- **Cancer** of the cervix, anus, vulva, vagina, penis, or mouth/throat. It often takes years, even decades, for cancer to develop after infection. These cancers are caused by high-risk HPV.

Protect Your Health

There is no treatment for the virus itself. But there are ways to guard against the health problems that HPV may cause.

• Get the HPV Vaccine

The vaccine protects against 9 types of HPV that are responsible for most of genital warts and cervical cancers. For 9 to 14 year-olds, it can be given as a series of 2 shots. 15 to 26 year-olds should get a series of 3 shots. Ask your doctor about the vaccine. If you have a preteen child, talk to their pediatrician.

• Get Screened for Cervical Cancer

At age 21, you should start getting regular Pap tests and possible HPV testing. Testing can detect abnormal cells that may lead to cervical cancer. Talk with your doctor about when and how often you should get screened. Early detection can lead to early treatment and prevent cervical cancer.

• Practice Safe Sex

Use condoms correctly every time that you have sex. This lowers your chances of getting HPV, especially the types not covered by the vaccine. Keep in mind that HPV can infect areas not covered by a condom. Not having sex or limiting your number of sexual partners also lowers the risk of getting HPV.



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