What you should know about HPV

What is genital HPV?

Genital human papillomavirus (HPV) infection is the most common sexually transmitted disease (STD) in the U.S. Most sexually active people will have genital HPV at some point in their lives. There are many different types of HPV. Genital HPV does not cause health problems for most people. However, certain types of genital HPV can cause cervical cancer in women. HPV has also been linked to cancer of the penis and anus, but these cancers are very rare in the U.S. Other types of genital HPV can cause genital warts – growths around the vagina, penis or anus.

How do people get genital HPV?

Genital HPV is usually passed from one person to another by skin-to-skin contact during vaginal or anal sex. Any genital contact with someone who has genital HPV can pass the virus.

Both men and women can get genital HPV and pass it on without ever knowing it. Sexually active younger women and teen girls are at greater risk for HPV infection because their cervical cells are not fully mature.

Because a person can have genital HPV for a long time without knowing it, there is often no way to know who gave it to you or when you got it.

What are the symptoms of genital HPV?

Most people with genital HPV have no symptoms. The most commonly noticed symptom of genital HPV infection is genital warts.

Can genital HPV be treated?

There is no cure for genital HPV. However, the body's immune system clears most HPV infections within a year.

Treatment is available for cervical cancer and the abnormal cell changes that can lead to cancer. Treatment is also available for genital warts caused by HPV.

What do genital warts look like?

Genital warts appear as flesh-colored growths around the vagina, penis, or anus. They may appear alone or in groups or clusters. The warts are usually painless, but they can cause itching or burning. Sometimes warts cannot be seen with the naked eye.

Genital warts may appear within several weeks after sexual contact, or they may take months to appear. Some genital warts may grow in size and number and may look like cauliflower.

The types of genital HPV that cause warts are not the types that can lead to cancer.

How are genital warts treated?

You will have to go to a doctor or health care provider to get treatment for genital warts. Possible treatment options include:

- Cryotherapy (freezing the warts off)
- Electrodessication (burning the warts off with
- electric current)
- Laser therapy (using intense light to destroy the warts)
- Surgery (cutting off the warts)
- Treating the warts with chemicals
- Prescription medication treatments

These treatments are just to remove the warts. They do not cure you of HPV and the warts may grow back.

Never use over-the-counter wart treatments for genital warts. These products can cause severe irritation and harm your skin.

How can cervical cancer be prevented?

Women and girls ages 9 to 26 can get the HPV vaccine.

There are two approved vaccines for HPV (Cervarix® and Gardasil®). Both vaccines are given in three shots over a six-month period. The first approved HPV vaccine protects against four types of HPV that cause most cervical cancers and genital warts.

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The second approved vaccine protects against two types of HPV that cause most cervical cancers. Ask your health care provider which one is right for you or your daughter.

The HPV vaccine is recommended* for all 11- and 12-year-old girls.

However, it can be given to girls as young as 9. The vaccine is most effective for females who have not had sex.

The HPV vaccine is also recommended* for women and girls ages 13 to 26 who have not yet received it.

Sexually active young women can still benefit from vaccination if they have not been infected with all the HPV types covered by the vaccine. Ask your health care provider if the vaccine is right for you.

Cervical cancer can be prevented by having regular Pap tests!

When a woman gets a Pap test (or "Pap smear"), her health care provider is looking at the cells of her cervix to make sure there are no abnormal cell changes (dysplasia) that could lead to cancer.

If abnormal cell changes are found early, they can be treated before becoming cancerous. Women should have a Pap test every year, or as often as recommended by their health care provider.

Because the new HPV vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV that cause cervical cancers, vaccinated women should continue getting regular Pap tests.

*U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention immunization recommendations. To learn more go to www.cdc.gov/vaccines.

What about HPV and pregnancy?

Most pregnant women with HPV do not have problems. However, active genital warts may cause problems during pregnancy or at birth. In rare cases, HPV can also be passed to a baby during childbirth. A pregnant woman should tell her doctor or health care provider if she or her sex partner(s) have ever had genital warts. Pregnant women should not get the HPV vaccine.

What about HPV vaccine for men and boys?

One of the vaccines, HPV4 vaccine (quadrivalent vaccine, commonly known by the brand name Gardasil®) may be given to boys and men ages 9 through 26 to reduce the risk of getting genital warts. HPV4 is given in three shots over a six-month period. Parents of boys can decide if the vaccine is right for their sons by talking with their sons' health care providers. Young men can also discuss this vaccine with their doctors.

How can I prevent genital HPV?

- **Don't have sex.** Remember, any genital contact with someone who has genital HPV can pass the virus.
- If you have sex, **use a latex condom every time.** Keep in mind that condoms do not always prevent genital HPV because the virus can occur in areas not covered by the condom. While condoms do not provide 100% protection, they are the best available form of protection for people who are sexually active.
- If you have sex, **stay with one partner who only has sex with you.** Use condoms unless tests show that your partner does not have STDs

How can I stay healthy?

- **Women and girls ages 9 to 26 can get the HPV vaccine.** Ask your doctor if the vaccine is right for you.
- **If you are a woman over the age of 18, or if you are under 18 and sexually active, have a Pap test every year**, or as often as recommended by your health care provider.
- **If you think you have genital warts, or if you think you have been exposed to HPV, see your doctor or go to your local STD clinic.** To find the clinic closest to you in Texas, call 2-1-1.
- If you are diagnosed with genital warts, **do not have sex until you have finished your treatment and the doctor tells you it is okay.**
- If you are diagnosed with genital warts, **ask your sex partner(s) to be checked for genital warts and other STDs.**

For HIV/STD testing locations in Texas, call: 2-1-1

For other HIV/STD questions, call:
1 (800) CDC-INFO (English/Español)
1 (888) 232-6348 (TTY)

For more information, go to: www.dshs.state.tx.us/hivstd

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