

What you should know about HPV

What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted disease (STD) in the U.S. Most sexually active people will have HPV at some point in their lives. There are more than 150 types of HPV.

In most cases, HPV goes away on its own without causing health problems. However, certain types of HPV can cause cervical, anal, vaginal, vulvar, penile, and throat cancers. Other types of genital HPV can cause genital warts – growths around the vagina, penis or anus.

How do people get HPV?

HPV is easily spread by skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity with another person. It is difficult to know when you got HPV or who gave it to you because you can have it for a long time without knowing it.

Sexually active younger women are at greater risk for HPV because their cervical cells are not fully mature and therefore more prone to infection.

What are the symptoms of HPV?

Most people with HPV have no symptoms. The most commonly noticed symptom of HPV infection is genital warts. An abnormal Pap test result may be the first clue that a woman has the virus.

Can HPV be treated?

There is no cure for HPV. However, the body's immune system clears most HPV infections within a couple of years. Treatment is also available for genital warts caused by HPV and the different types of cancers caused by HPV. The treatment does not cure the virus.

Can screening help prevent cervical cancer?

Women should get regular cervical cancer screenings starting at age 21 and continuing through age 65. Ask your provider how often you need to be screened.

HPV vaccines do not protect against all types of HPV that cause cervical cancer, so vaccinated women should keep getting regular screenings.

Is there a vaccine against HPV?

Yes, vaccines can protect against some of the most common types of HPV that can lead to cancer or genital warts. The vaccines are most effective if given to both boys and girls around ages 11-12. Talk with your doctor about the HPV vaccine.

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. Genital warts are usually painless, but they can cause itching or burning.

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

