



What You Need to Know About Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

What is HPV?

HPV stands for human papillomavirus (HPV). Many types of HPV have been identified. This fact sheet describes HPV, which is sexually transmitted and affects the genital and reproductive system.

It's important to note that HPV is **not** related to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

Should I be concerned about HPV?

HPV is estimated to be the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the United States. Recent research shows that it is also a growing problem in Canada.



Understanding HPV is important because it *can* lead to certain types of cancer, particularly cervical cancer in women (cancer of the opening to the uterus). While most types of HPV do not cause cancer, there are approximately 13 types that have been linked to cancer.

How do you get HPV?



Genital HPV is passed from one person to another through sexual contact. Direct **skin to skin** contact with the penis, scrotum, vagina, vulva, or rectum with an infected person is the most common way of transmitting HPV. It is possible to transmit HPV if there is kissing or touching of a partner's genitals with the mouth. The virus is **not** transmitted by blood.

Who is at risk?

Any individual who is sexually active, or has been sexually active in the past is at risk of being infected with HPV.

Studies suggest that individuals who have had many sexual partners, and those who start having sexual intercourse at a young age may be at increased risk for HPV.



What are the signs and symptoms?

Genital warts (also called Condylomata) are one sign that someone is infected with HPV. Genital warts may look like a small cauliflower or they may be flat. In women genital warts can appear on the vulva, cervix, rectum or thigh area. In men they can appear on the penis, scrotum, rectum or thigh area. Genital warts are not likely to cause cancer.

HPV is most often a "silent" infection, meaning that many individuals with HPV will show **no obvious signs** of infection. However, the infection *can* cause changes that are visible only through a microscope.

- For women, the majority of HPV infections are microscopic affecting the cells of the cervix (the opening to the uterus or womb). This type of infection can be either inactive or active.
- With an inactive infection, the cells of the cervix appear normal under a microscope. There are no signs or symptoms of infection, and the woman may never know she was infected. The body fights the virus in ways which are not clearly understood.
 - With an active infection, the infected cervical cells display changes that can only be seen through a microscope.
 - Depending on the type of HPV, an active infection can progress to one of two extremes:

Abnormal cells become normal again, and the infection becomes inactive. However, there is always the chance that an inactive infection can become active again for reasons not clearly understood.

Abnormal cervical cells can slowly progress to cervical cancer. Studies show that in cases of women with cervical cancer, over 90% test positive for HPV.

If most signs of HPV infection are microscopic, how will you know if you have HPV?

For women, the detection of abnormal cells on a Pap smear will often be the first alert to the presence of HPV. For this reason regular Pap smears are essential for women once they become sexually active.



What happens if you have an abnormal Pap smear result?

If abnormal cells are detected in a Pap smear, your physician will monitor you and may request further investigation. Often this will involve a repeat Pap smear. In some cases you will be referred to a colposcopist who will examine the cells of your cervix through a special scope. Small biopsies or samples of tissue from the cervix may be taken to determine the extent of the microscopic changes. These examinations may lead to additional treatments such as cryotherapy, electro-surgery or laser surgery to remove the abnormal cells.



Do I need to have a Pap smear if I am not sexually active, or I am in a monogamous relationship?

Women who are not sexually active or who are beyond reproductive age may believe that they do not need regular Pap smears, but this is not true. Continued and regular Pap smears are important because HPV can become active years after an infection has occurred. For the same reason women who are in a monogamous relationship who may feel that their risk for HPV is low should also have regular Pap smears.

How are genital warts treated?

Genital warts can be treated if they produce bothersome symptoms or for cosmetic reasons. Medicated gels can be applied to the warts in the physician's office or at home. These usually require several treatments to be effective. In some cases other methods including cryotherapy, electro-surgery, laser therapy, or surgery may be used. The removal of visible warts does not always eliminate HPV entirely; sometimes the warts reoccur.

How can you protect yourself from HPV?

If you are sexually active, avoiding contact with an infected person, and limiting the number of sexual partners you have can reduce your risk of getting HPV.

Because condoms do not cover the entire genital area during sexual contact, they provide **safer sex**, and not absolute safe sex. However, condoms may **reduce** your chances of getting HPV, and are very important in preventing the transmission of other STI's such as chlamydia and gonorrhoea.

Should I tell my partner if I have HPV?

Open and clear communication between partners is an essential part of an intimate and trusting relationship. Informing your partner that you have HPV shows your partner that you respect her/him and care about her/his health.



Does HPV mean that someone has cheated in a relationship?

It is important to know that with overall changes in health, an inactive HPV infection can become active. Recent diagnosis of HPV or genital warts does not necessarily mean that a partner has cheated because the infection may have occurred years ago, and may only recently have become active and detectable. Genital warts can appear weeks to years after contact with an infected person.

How many people in Canada have HPV? How big of a problem is it?

For a long time there were no studies done to estimate how many Canadians have HPV; however, recent research has been conducted within Canada to determine the prevalence of HPV. It is estimated that the prevalence for cancer-causing types of HPV in different groups of Canadian women ranges from 11%-25%. Only some of the women will actually go on to develop cervical cancer.

Will having HPV reduce my chances of having a baby in the future?

HPV does not interfere with a woman's ability to get pregnant.

If a woman has the type of HPV that causes genital warts, these warts may get larger during pregnancy due to increased hormone levels. The size and number of warts will be monitored during the pregnancy.

