



Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

Home

Genital HPV Infection – Basic Fact Sheet



Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common [sexually transmitted infection \(STI\)](#) in the United States. HPV vaccines can prevent some of the health effects HPV causes. This fact sheet answers basic questions about HPV.

What is HPV?

[HPV](#) is the most common STI. There were about 43 million HPV infections in 2018, many among people in their late teens and early 20s. There are many different types of HPV. Some types can cause health problems, including genital warts and cancers. But there are vaccines that can stop these health problems from happening. HPV is a different virus than [HIV](#) and [HSV](#) (herpes).

How is HPV spread?

You can get HPV by having vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who has the virus. It is most commonly spread during vaginal or anal sex. It also spreads through close skin-to-skin touching during sex. A person with HPV can pass the infection to someone even when they have no signs or symptoms.

If you are sexually active, you can get HPV, even if you have had sex with only one person. You also can develop symptoms years after having sex with someone who has the infection. This makes it hard to know when you first got it.

Does HPV cause health problems?

In most cases (9 out of 10), HPV goes away on its own within two years without health problems. But when HPV does not go away, it can cause health problems like genital warts and cancer.

Genital warts usually appear as a small bump or group of bumps in the genital area. They can be small or large, raised or flat, or shaped like a cauliflower. A healthcare provider can usually diagnose warts by looking at the genital area.

Does HPV cause cancer?

HPV can cause cervical and other [cancers](#), including cancer of the vulva, vagina, penis, or anus. It can also cause cancer in the back of the throat (called oropharyngeal cancer). This can include the base of the tongue and tonsils.

Cancer often takes years, even decades, to develop after a person gets HPV. Genital warts and cancers result from different types of HPV.

There is no way to know who will develop cancer or other health problems from HPV. People with weak immune systems (including those with HIV) may be less able to fight off HPV. They may also be more likely to develop health problems from HPV.

How can I avoid HPV and the health problems it can cause?

You can do several things to lower your chances of getting HPV.

Get vaccinated. The HPV vaccine is safe and effective. It can protect against diseases (including cancers) caused by HPV when given in the recommended age groups. (See “Who should get vaccinated?” below.)

Get screened for cervical cancer. Routine screening for women aged 21 to 65 years old can prevent cervical cancer.

If you are sexually active:

- Use condoms [the right way](#) every time you have sex. This can lower your chances of getting HPV. But HPV can infect areas the condom does not cover. So, condoms may not fully protect against getting HPV; and
- Be in a mutually monogamous relationship – or have sex only with someone who only has sex with you.

Who should get the HPV vaccine?

CDC [recommends](#) HPV vaccination for:

- All preteens (including boys and girls) at age 11 or 12 years (or can start at age 9 years).
- Everyone through age 26 years, if not vaccinated already.

Vaccination is not recommended for everyone older than age 26 years. However, some adults age 27 through 45 years who are not already vaccinated may decide to get the HPV vaccine after speaking with their healthcare provider about their risk for new HPV infections and the possible benefits of vaccination. HPV vaccination in this age range provides less benefit. Most sexually active adults have already been exposed to HPV, although not necessarily all of the HPV types targeted by vaccination.

At any age, having a new sex partner is a risk factor for getting a new HPV infection. People who are already in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship are not likely to get a new HPV infection.

How do I know if I have HPV?

There is no test to find out a person’s “HPV status.” Also, there is no approved HPV test to find HPV in the mouth or throat.

There are HPV tests that can screen for cervical cancer. Healthcare providers only use these tests for screening women aged 30 years and older. HPV tests are not recommended to screen men, adolescents, or women under the age of 30 years.

Most people with HPV do not know they have the infection. They never develop symptoms or health problems from it. Some people find out they have HPV when they get genital warts. Women may find out they have HPV when they get an abnormal Pap test result (during cervical cancer screening). Others may only find out once they’ve developed more serious problems from HPV, such as cancers.

How common is HPV and health problems that develop from HPV?

HPV (the virus): CDC estimates that there were 43 million HPV infections in 2018. In that same year, there were 13 million new infections. HPV is so common that almost every sexually active person will get HPV at some point if they don’t get vaccinated.

Health problems related to HPV include genital warts and cervical cancer.

Genital warts: Prior to HPV vaccines, genital warts caused by HPV affected roughly 340,000 to 360,000 people yearly.* About one in 100 sexually active adults in the U.S. has genital warts at any given time.

Cervical cancer: Every year, nearly 12,000 women living in the U.S. will have cervical cancer. More than 4,000 women die from cervical cancer—even with screening and treatment.

[There are other conditions and cancers](#) caused by HPV that occur in people living in the United States. Every year, about 19,400 women and 12,100 men experience cancers caused by HPV.

*These figures only look at the number of people who sought care for genital warts. This could be less than the actual number of people who get genital warts.

I'm pregnant. Will having HPV affect my pregnancy?

Pregnant people with HPV can get genital warts or develop abnormal cell changes on the cervix. Routine cervical cancer screening can help find abnormal cell changes. You should get routine cervical cancer screening even when you are pregnant.

Is there treatment for HPV or health problems that develop from HPV?

There is no treatment for the virus itself. However, there are treatments for the health problems that HPV can cause:

1. **Genital warts** can go away with treatment from your healthcare provider or with prescription medicine. If left untreated, genital warts may go away, stay the same, or grow in size or number.
2. **Cervical precancer** treatment is available. Women who get routine Pap tests and follow up as needed can find problems *before* cancer develops. Prevention is always better than treatment. For more information visit [cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org) .
3. **Other HPV-related cancers** are also more treatable when found and treated early. For more information visit [cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org) .

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