



HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS (HPV) INFECTION

What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) are very common. There are over 100 different types of HPV that can affect the skin. Some HPV cause warts on the hands and feet. Other HPV are transmitted sexually and may cause genital warts, infections or cancers; including cancer of the cervix (neck of the womb), vulva (female external genital) anus, and penis. It is so common that around four out of five people who are sexually active will be infected by HPV at some stage in their lives without even knowing it.

What are the symptoms?

Most people that are infected with HPV do not have any obvious symptoms. A small number of people develop genital warts. Women with HPV infection may develop abnormalities in the cells of the cervix (neck of the womb), called dysplasia, an abnormal change to the cells that cover the cervix. People who practice anal sex and become infected with HPV can develop anal cancer. There also appears to be a link between HPV, oral sex and cancers of the mouth and throat.

How is HPV spread?

HPV that can cause genital warts, cervical and other cancers is spread through direct skin-to-skin contact during sexual touching and unprotected vaginal, oral, or anal sex with someone who has HPV.

How is HPV diagnosed?

Genital warts can be diagnosed by your health-care provider based on your medical history and a physical examination.

The Pap test is the most common test for detecting HPV infection and dysplasia in women. If your Pap test shows signs of dysplasia, your health-care provider may recommend a special test or colposcopy. This test involves looking at the cervix with a magnifying instrument. Sometimes a small piece of tissue (a biopsy) is taken for further examination. Consult your healthcare provider to have more information on Pap Test.

If you have an HPV infection, you and the person(s) you have sex with should be tested for other sexually transmitted infections.

Who is at risk of HPV infections?

You are more likely to get HPV if you:

- don't use condoms or dental dams every time you have sex (vaginal, oral, or anal);
- have more than one sex partner or your partner has had multiple sex partners;
- start sexual activity at an early age;
- have a weakened immune system that makes it hard for your body to fight off infection;

How can HPV infection be prevented?

Condoms can reduce some of the risk of getting HPV but they will not always cover the infected area as the virus can be anywhere on the genital or anal area. Use of dental dams during oral sex can also reduce the risk of HPV infection.

[Find out more](#) on how to prevent HPV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Two HPV vaccines (Gardasil™ and Cervarix®) are available for use in Canada. The vaccines protect against the HPV types most commonly linked to cervical cancer. The Gardasil vaccine also protects against genital warts. The vaccine is most effective if given before you are exposed to HPV (i.e. before you become sexually active). That is why the HPV vaccine, Gardasil, is now being offered to New Brunswick girls in Grade 7.

Not all types of HPV associated with cervical cancer are covered by the vaccines, so women still need to have Pap tests, even if you have been immunized. The vaccine is also effective in boys, and although not publicly funded, your healthcare provider and some pharmacists can provide the vaccine.

How is HPV infection treated?

There is no curative treatment against HPV. Once you have the virus, it stays in your body until it is eventually cleared by your immune system. Consult your healthcare provider for information on the treatment of HPV infection and genital warts.

Treatment for genital warts may include applying a cream or liquid nitrogen to the warts. Sometimes, laser treatment may be required.

Treatment for dysplasia may include removal of the abnormal cells and tissues. Treatment will prevent the development of cervical cancer in nearly all women.

Further Information

For additional information, contact your healthcare provider, your local [Public Health office](#) or Tele-Care at 811.

Useful website:

Public Health Agency of Canada www.phac-aspc.gc.ca

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