

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Genital Warts



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Public Health
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Burlington County Health Department
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What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted disease (STD) in the United States. HPV is so common that nearly all sexually active men and women get it at some point in their lives. There are many different types of HPV. Some types can cause genital warts and cancers. But there are vaccines that can prevent infection of the most common types.

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. HPV can be passed even when an infected person has no signs or symptoms.

Anyone who is sexually active can get HPV, even if they have had sex with only one person. Symptoms can develop years after you have sex with someone who is infected, making it hard to know when you first became infected.

Does HPV cause health problems?

In most cases, HPV goes away on its own and does not cause any health problems. But when HPV does not go away, it can cause 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 them.

There is no way to know if someone with HPV will develop genital warts, cancer, or other health problems. People with weakened immune systems may be less likely to fight off HPV.

What cancers can you get from HPV?

HPV can cause cervical cancer and other cancers including cancer of the vulva, vagina, penis, or anus. It can also cause cancer in the back of the throat, including the base of the tongue and tonsils. Cancer often takes years, even decades, to develop after a person gets HPV. The types of HPV that cause genital warts are not the same types that can cause cancers.

How can HPV infection be prevented?

Getting vaccinated. HPV vaccinations are safe and effective. They can protect males and females against diseases (including cancer) caused by HPV when given between the ages of 11-26.

Getting tested. Women should get routine Pap smears to screen for cervical cancer or other precancerous conditions.

Protecting yourself. Limiting the number of sexual partners can lower your risk of contracting HPV. Use latex condoms properly, every time you have sex.

Who should get vaccinated?

All boys and girls between the ages of 11-26 should get vaccinated. Gay and bisexual men (or any man who has sex with men) and immune compromised individuals should also get vaccinated. It is also recommended that for men and women with weakened or compromised immune systems, up to the age of 26.

How do I know if I have HPV?

There is no test to find out if you have HPV. However, there are tests that are used to screen for cervical cancer, which is recommended for women over the age of 30. Some people find out when they get genital warts, but most people with HPV do not know they have it and never develop health problems or symptoms.

How can I be treated for HPV or health problems caused by HPV?

There is no treatment for the virus. However, there are treatments for the health problems caused by HPV:

- *Genital Warts* can be treated by a doctor with prescription medication. If left untreated, warts may go away, stay the same, or grow in size or number.
- *Cervical precancer* can be treated. Women who get routine Pap smears and follow ups can identify problems before cancer develops. Prevention is always better than treatment. *Other HPV-related cancers* are also more treatable when diagnosed early.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/>
- The Burlington County Department of Health at (609) 265-5533
- The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDoH) at 1-800-624-2377 or on the NJDoH website at: <http://www.nj.gov/health/>