

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT HPV

What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the name of a group of viruses that infect the skin. There are over 100 different types of HPV. Some types of HPV can cause genital warts and other types can cause cancer, especially cervical cancer. These types of HPV are sexually transmitted.

The **high-risk HPV types** that cause cell changes to the cervix can, if not found, increase a woman's chance of developing cervical cancer. The **low-risk types** that cause genital warts are almost never found with cervical cancers. HPV can also cause cancer of the vulva, vagina, penis or anus. It can also cause cancer in the back of the throat. But most HPV infections do not cause symptoms that are noticeable. Most people never know they have the virus.

How common is HPV?

Currently there are more than 79 million with HPV and 14 million will get it each year.

How do you get HPV?

HPV is spread by direct, skin-to-skin contact, during vagina, anal, or oral sex with someone who has an infection. Warts on other parts of the body, such as the hands, are caused by different types of HPV. People do not get genital warts by coming in contact with warts on the hands or the feet.

How long do you have HPV before it is diagnosed?

Warts may appear within several weeks after sex with a person who has HPV, or they may take months or years to appear, or they may never appear. It might take weeks, months, or even years after exposure to HPV before cervical cell changes are detected. This makes it hard to know exactly when you got the virus, or from whom.

How are genital warts diagnosed?

Warts can be small and very hard to see, even during a medical exam. Also, sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between a wart and normal bumps or pimples. A healthcare provider will check you more closely and may use a magnifying lens to find small warts.

How are cervical cell changes detected?

A Pap test is used to find abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix caused by HPV. An HPV test can find any of the high-risk types of HPV that are commonly found in cervical cancer.

How are genital warts treated?

There are several treatments for genital warts. The goal of any treatment should be

to remove visible genital warts to get rid of symptoms. No one treatment is best for all cases.

When choosing what treatment to use, your healthcare provider will consider the size, location and number of warts; changes in the warts; patient preference; cost of treatment; convenience; adverse effects; and their own experience with the treatments. Treatment will take only one session for some, while others may have to return.

How are cervical cell changes treated?

Most cases of mild cervical cell changes are not dangerous and go away on their own. Many healthcare providers opt to take care of women with a “watch and wait” approach of frequent follow up exams rather than treatment.

When treatment is needed, options include cryosurgery (freezing abnormal tissue), laser (a powerful beam of light to cut or destroy tissue), LEEP (also known as LOOP or LLETZ), using a thin, electrically charged wire to cut away abnormal cells), and cone biopsy (removing a cone-shaped piece of tissue with a surgical knife, laser, or LOOP). Ask your healthcare provider to tell you about the treatment chosen for you.

Can HPV be cured?

There is no cure for HPV. The virus can remain within skin cells even after treatment. Because the virus can lie dormant in cells, warts can return after treatment. However, once clear for several months, most people with genital warts never have any come back. Some experts believe this may be because a person’s own immune system helps to either suppress, or possibly clear, the virus.

What about HPV and pregnancy?

Let your healthcare provider know if you or your partner(s) have been diagnosed with HPV or

genital warts. Keep in mind, though, that most pregnant people with genital warts deliver naturally and have healthy babies. A person with genital warts does not need to have a Cesarean section unless warts are blocking the birth canal.

Can vaccination prevent HPV?

Yes! The HPV vaccine is more than 90% effective at preventing HPV related infections which can lead to cervical cancer, anal, vulvar and vaginal cancers and genital warts.

The vaccine is recommended at 11 or 12 years of age but may be given through age 45. The vaccine is given in a series of three shots over six months for those over age 15 or only two doses for those under age 15. People with a cervix who get the vaccine must still get regular Pap tests.

Learn More

Learn more about HPV and other STIs from the American Sexual Health Association, a trusted nonprofit organization that has advocated on behalf of those at risk for STIs for more than a century. Our websites include:

www.ashasexualhealth.org
www.iwannaknow.org
www.quierosaber.org
www.nccc-online.org
www.askexpertsnow.com
www.YESmeansTEST.org

