

HPV: HUMAN PAPILLOMA VIRUS

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Human papilloma virus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted genital infection. To date, there are more than 40 types of HPV that can infect the genital region of males and females. These same HPV types can also infect the mouth and esophagus (throat), which is becoming an increasing concern. The majority of people infected with HPV don't even know they have it and are unaware they are passing the virus on to a sex partner. HPV can be passed from one individual to another through genital contact (usually during vaginal or anal sex), during oral sex, and genital-to-genital contact. A person can have HPV even though years have passed since he/she had any sexual contact with an infected person. Lastly, it is possible to have more than one type of HPV infection.

Conditions Associated With HPV

Most people with HPV do not develop symptoms or health problems from it. In approximately 90% of people infected with HPV, the immune system is able to clear the virus naturally within two years. However, in the other 10% of infections, HPV can cause conditions such as genital warts, warts in the esophagus, and cancer (cervical, vulvar, vaginal, penile, anal and oropharyngeal). The types of HPV that cause genital warts are different from the types that cause the cancers noted above. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing who will get HPV and which of these infected individuals will go on to develop cancer or other health problems.

Genital warts generally appear as a small bump or group of bumps in the genital region. Warts can be small or large, flat or raised or cauliflower-shaped. A health care provider can diagnose these during an office exam. Warts can appear within weeks or months of sexual contact with an infected partner even if the infected partner had no signs of genital warts. Warts do not have the potential to turn into cancer. If they remain untreated, they may remain unchanged, increase in size or number, or go away on their own.

Importance Of Regular Screenings

Women with cervical cancer generally do not exhibit symptoms until the cancer is in an advanced state. Thus, it is important for women to get regular screenings for cervical cancer. Cervical cancer is the most preventable female cancer and can be detected with regular screening tests and appropriate follow-up. Two screening tests are available to detect/prevent cervical cancer: the PAP test and the HPV test. The PAP test is recommended for all women from age 21-65 and can be done in a doctor's office. It is one of the most reliable and effective cancer screening tests available. However, it should be emphasized that the only cancer for which the PAP test screens is cervical cancer (NOT ovarian, uterine, vaginal or vulvar cancers). During this test, cells are taken from the cervical region and sent to the lab. The lab will check to determine if the cells are normal. For women ages 30-65, an HPV test is done in addition to the PAP test and sent to the lab.

Treatments

Regarding the HPV virus, unfortunately there are no known treatments for the virus itself. However, there is a controversial vaccine called Gardasil that is supposed to help prevent against four types of HPV (two that cause 70% of cervical cancers and two more that cause 90 % of genital warts). In addition, there are treatments available for the problems caused by HPV.



Visible external genital warts can be removed either by a health care provider or by the patient using a number of treatment options. Treatments include: topical gels or ointments (applied by patient or health care provider), surgical excision (usually requiring a series of treatments), cryotherapy ("freezing" with liquid Nitrogen), or laser therapy. Vaginal warts can be treated with cryotherapy or topical solutions. Anal warts can be treated with cryotherapy, topical solutions, or surgical removal. If anogenital warts are left untreated, some may disappear on their own.

Focus On Prevention

Most types of HPV found during screenings done with the PAP test require no treatment and often clear over a period of time. However, certain types of HPV associated with cervical cancer, and abnormal cervical cells require further evaluation and follow up by a health care provider. Cervical cancer is best treated when it is diagnosed and treated early. The majority of women who get routine cervical cancer and HPV screenings can find problems before cancer even develops. Prevention is always better than treatment. SM

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