

HPV facts

[Human Papillomavirus]

What is HPV? HPV is the short form for Human Papillomavirus. HPV is a family of very common viruses that cause almost all cervical cancers, plus a variety of other problems like common warts, genital warts and plantar warts. HPV also causes cancers of the vulva, vagina, anus, and cancers of the head and neck. Both women and men become infected with HPV types that cause cervical cancer through sexual intercourse and sexual contact.

Are there different kinds of HPV? There are over 100 known types of the HPV virus, with over 35 different HPV types that can infect the genital tract. At least a dozen of these 'high-risk' HPV types can lead to cervical cancer. The most common cancer-causing types of the virus are HPV 16 and HPV 18. These two types alone cause about 70% of all cervical cancer. The cervical cancer vaccines are extremely effective in protecting against these two types.

How does HPV affect me? An HPV infection rarely leads to cervical cancer. In most women infected with HPV, the cells in the cervix return to normal after the body's immune system protects you from the HPV infection without the woman ever knowing she has had it. However, some HPV infections do not go away and may remain present in the cervical cells for years. Long-standing infection can lead to changes in the cells that can progress to cancer, if not treated. It is these cell changes that a Pap test can detect. Because it can last so long in your body before any cell changes occur, it is difficult to know who transmitted the HPV to you. Don't make assumptions and blame your current partner.

How common is HPV? HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection. At least 70% of sexually active people will get an HPV infection at some time in

their lives. HPV is most common in young women and men who are in their late teens and early 20's. The CDC estimates that there are 6.2 million new infections each year in the United States. Since it is so common, there is nothing to be ashamed about. If you are diagnosed with HPV, talk to your healthcare provider about it. Get answers to your questions.

What are the signs and symptoms of HPV? Most women and men do not know if they are infected with HPV. There are generally no symptoms with an active HPV infection. Anyone who has ever had genital contact with another person, not just sexual intercourse, can get HPV. Both men and women can get it—and pass it on to their sex partners without even realizing it. An abnormal Pap test result is usually a woman's first clue of an infection, but most HPV-infected women do not ever have an abnormal Pap test result. HPV is not HIV or Herpes. They are different viruses with different symptoms.

How can I protect against HPV infection? The only sure way to prevent HPV infection is to abstain from all sexual activity. Sexually active adults can reduce their risk by being in a mutually faithful relationship with someone who has had no other or few sex partners, or by limiting their number of sex partners. But even persons with only one lifetime sex partner can get HPV if their partner has had previous partners.

Do condoms protect against HPV? Recent studies suggest that condoms provide some protection against the HPV infection. However, since condoms do not cover all areas of the body involved in sexual contact that can be the source of the spread of HPV, they do not offer complete protection. In addition to HPV protection, they do reduce the risk of HIV and other infections transmitted by sexual contact when used all the time and in the right way.

What are the factors that increase your risk for HPV? You are more likely to get HPV if you smoke, if you start having sex at a young age, or if you have many sex partners or your sex partner has many sex partners.

How do I know if I have HPV? The only way to know if you have an HPV infection is if your healthcare provider tests you for the virus. This may be done from a Pap test and/or a separate HPV test. Your healthcare provider may or may not perform the HPV test, depending on many factors including your age and risk factors. It is important to have regular Pap tests and HPV tests as recommended by your healthcare provider.

Why isn't there an HPV test for men? The diseases that HPV causes in women do not happen in men. So the test results will not be helpful for a man. There is no shot or pill available to make an HPV infection go away. Also, testing for HPV in men is more complicated and generally does not perform as well as HPV testing for women.

What is an HPV Test? An HPV test detects high-risk—or cancer causing—types of HPV that can cause changes in your cervical cells. However, this test cannot tell you the exact type of high-risk HPV. Women 30 years of age and older can have both the Pap test and an HPV test for cervical cancer screening. An HPV test can also be used to help understand the meaning of a borderline abnormal Pap test. In that situation, your healthcare provider may do an HPV test to find out more about the abnormal cells. However, if your Pap test shows a definite pre-cancerous abnormality, an HPV test is not needed. Virtually all of these precancerous abnormalities are caused by HPV. If you have one of the abnormalities, you can assume the HPV test will be positive.

What is an HPV typing test? The standard HPV test only tells us if a woman has an HPV infection, not which type or types of HPV she has. HPV typing can identify the specific HPV type, not just the presence of any type. Like an HPV test, an HPV genotyping test is often taken from the same sample as the Pap test or by an additional gentle swab of your cervix at the time of a Pap test. This test can be used to help decide what type of follow-up you should have.

I've been told I have HPV. How do I know if or when it has cleared up? Most HPV infections will clear up on their own. Those women that have long-standing HPV infections are more at risk for developing cervical precancerous lesions or cervical cancer. There is no shot or pill that is available to clear your HPV infection. Hopefully, as in most women, your body's immune system will clear your HPV infection on its own. If your healthcare provider is performing an HPV test on you and your test is negative, it is likely that your infection cleared.

Is there a cure for HPV? Currently, there is no cure for HPV. There are treatments for the cervical changes that HPV can cause. If your Pap and HPV tests show that cells in your cervix have changed, you should discuss treatment options with your healthcare provider.

Can you prevent HPV? Good news! There are vaccines to help prevent HPV infection. Girls and young women age 9–26 can help protect themselves against those types of HPV most responsible for cervical changes that can lead to cancer, and 2 more types that cause most genital warts. Boys and young men ages 9 to 26 can receive a vaccine to help protect against 90% of genital warts and precancerous cells that can occur in the anus.

How do the vaccines work? The cervical cancer vaccines take prevention a giant leap forward by blocking the first step along the pathway to cervical cancer, HPV infection. The vaccine is given in the arm or thigh three times—at the first visit, about one to two months later and then six months after the first shot. The best protection is achieved after all three shots are given. It is not known at this time whether booster shots will be needed later. Studies show that the vaccine is extremely safe. There are no live viruses in the vaccine. The most common side effects are redness and soreness where the shot was given. Headaches (like when you have a cold or fever) are also common. Fever also can occur. Over the counter pain and fever medications will help if you have these vaccine-related symptoms. As with any new medication, safety issues will continue to be monitored.



REMEMBER:

You can prevent cervical cancer.

- ✓ Vaccinate early.
- ✓ Pap test regularly.
- ✓ HPV test when recommended by your healthcare provider.

For more information, visit our Web site: foundationforwomenscancer.org

The Foundation for Women's Cancer is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization whose mission is to ensure public awareness of gynecologic cancer prevention, early detection and optimal treatment. In addition, the Foundation supports research and training related to gynecologic cancers. The Foundation advances this mission by increasing public and private funds that aid in the development and implementation of programs to meet these goals.

For more information about the Foundation, its educational materials or research grants, please visit foundationforwomenscancer.org, or contact the Foundation Headquarters Office by phone at 312.578.1439, or by e-mail at info@foundationforwomenscancer.org. For additional information on gynecologic cancers or for a referral to a gynecologic oncologist or a related specialist, please call the toll-free Foundation Information Hotline at 800.444.4441.

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