

Human papillomavirus (HPV) infection and genital warts

What is HPV infection?

HPV is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It is a family of over 100 types of viruses that can infect the penis, vulva (area outside of the vagina) or anus, and the linings of the vagina, cervix or rectum.

Most of the time HPV infection does not have any symptoms, and will go away on its own without treatment. The virus is most commonly found on the genitals and anus. It is found less often on the mouth or in the throat.

Out of more than 100 types of HPV, about 40 of these affect the genitals. Two types cause 70 per cent of cancers of the cervix, plus some less common cancers of the throat, anus, penis, vagina and vulva.

Two other types of HPV cause most cases of genital warts, which are flat or cauliflower-like bumps that occur in the genital area.

It is possible to have more than 1 type of HPV infection at the same time. For an accurate diagnosis, a health care provider should check all suspicious bumps and lesions. Cervical cancer that is caused by HPV is detected using a Pap test, which is a routine part of a female sexual health exam.

How is HPV spread?

HPV spreads by skin-to-skin contact. This can be during oral, vaginal or anal sex, or during any other sexual activity in which skin-to-skin contact takes place.

How common is HPV infection?

Three out of 4 sexually active people will get at least one HPV infection at some time in their lives. The more sexual partners you have, the higher the possibility of getting an HPV infection.

What are the symptoms of HPV?

Genital warts are a symptom of HPV infection. Genital warts are flat or cauliflower-like bumps that

are usually painless, may be itchy, and sometimes bleed. They can be found in the groin, genitals, buttocks and inside the vagina or anus. They are rarely found in the mouth.

Since many strains of HPV do not produce visible warts, most people do not show any signs or symptoms of an HPV infection. As a result, they can pass HPV to others without knowing it.

What are the risks of HPV infection?

Most people who have an HPV infection clear it within 2 years. When it does not clear, cells infected with a cancer-causing type of HPV start to change. This change can lead to cancer of the cervix, anus, vagina, vulva, penis and throat. Of these types of cancers, cervical cancer is the most common. Approximately 200 women develop cervical cancer every year in B.C., and close to 50 women die from the disease.

How are genital warts treated?

Genital warts can be treated using topical prescription medication or freezing. The length of treatment may vary depending upon the severity of the warts and the treatment that is used. These treatments do not get rid of the HPV infection. A person may still pass the infection on after treatment, even if the warts are no longer visible.

Caution: Do not use non-prescription wart removal products to treat genital warts. These products are not intended for use in the genital area and may cause serious burning.

Is there a vaccine for HPV?

There are 2 HPV vaccines available in Canada: Cervarix® and Gardasil®9. Both vaccines protect against infection by HPV types that cause most cases of cervical cancer and several less common cancers. Gardasil®9 also protects against infection by HPV types that cause most cases of genital warts. The vaccines help prevent HPV infection but do not get

rid of the infection once it has occurred. For more information on the HPV vaccines, see [HealthLinkBC File #101b Human papillomavirus \(HPV\) vaccines](#).

How can I reduce my chance of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI)?

Practice safer sex by using a condom

When used correctly, external (“male”) and internal (“female”) condoms help prevent the spread of many STIs during vaginal, anal and oral sex. Condoms are less effective at protecting against STIs transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, such as herpes simplex virus, genital warts (human papillomavirus (HPV)) and syphilis (when sores are present).

Important things to remember when using condoms:

- Check the condom package for damage. Do not use a damaged condom
- Check the expiry date. Do not use a condom after its expiry date
- Carefully open the package so that the condom does not tear. Do not use a torn condom
- Keep condoms away from sharp objects such as rings, studs or piercings
- Store condoms at room temperature
- Use a new condom every time you have sex. Do not reuse condoms
- Do not use 2 condoms at once. Using 2 condoms together may result in a condom breaking
- Use only water-based lubricants with external (“male”) latex condoms. Oil-based lubricants, such as petroleum jelly, lotion or baby oil, can weaken and destroy latex
- Water or oil-based lubricant may be used with polyurethane/nitrile condoms
- Use only condoms made of latex or polyurethane/nitrile/polyisoprene rubbers. Latex and polyurethane condoms are the best types of condoms to use to help prevent pregnancy and STIs. (Lambskin and sheepskin condoms can help prevent pregnancy but don’t work as well as latex or polyurethane condoms to prevent STIs)

- Avoid using condoms with spermicides containing nonoxynol-9 (N-9). N-9 can irritate tissue and may increase the chance of getting an STI

Get vaccinated

Vaccines can prevent some STIs, such as hepatitis A, B and human papillomavirus (HPV). Talk to your health care provider about how to get these vaccinations.

Know your sexual health status

If you have recently changed sexual partners, or have multiple sex partners, getting regularly tested for STIs will tell you if you have an infection. Some people can have an STI and not have any symptoms. Finding and treating an STI reduces the chances of passing infections on to your partner(s).

The more partners you have, the higher your chances of getting exposed to STIs.

Talk about prevention

Talk to your partner(s) about STIs and how you would like to prevent them before having sex. If you are having trouble discussing safer sex with your partner(s), talk about it with your health care provider or a counsellor.

For tips on how to talk to your partner(s), visit the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) Smart Sex Resource <https://smartsexresource.com/sexual-health/partners-communication/talking-to-your-partners>.

Informing partners

If you have a sexually transmitted infection and are sexually active, it is important to tell your sexual partner(s). This will enable them to make decisions about their health and getting tested.

For more information

For more information on how you can reduce your chance of getting an STI, see [HealthLinkBC File #080 Preventing sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#).



BC Centre for Disease Control
Provincial Health Services Authority

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