

GENITAL HPV INFECTION

WHAT IS GENITAL HPV INFECTION?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted virus. Approximately three out of four people who have sex will get a genital HPV infection at some point during their lives. HPV is not the same virus as HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) or HSV (herpes simplex virus) which are other sexually transmitted viral infections.

HOW IS HPV SPREAD?

HPV is primarily spread through vaginal, anal or oral sex. HPV can also be spread by skin-to-skin contact without sexual intercourse. HPV can be transmitted from one person to another even when an infected person has no signs of symptoms of genital HPV infection.

DOES HPV CAUSE HEALTH PROBLEMS?

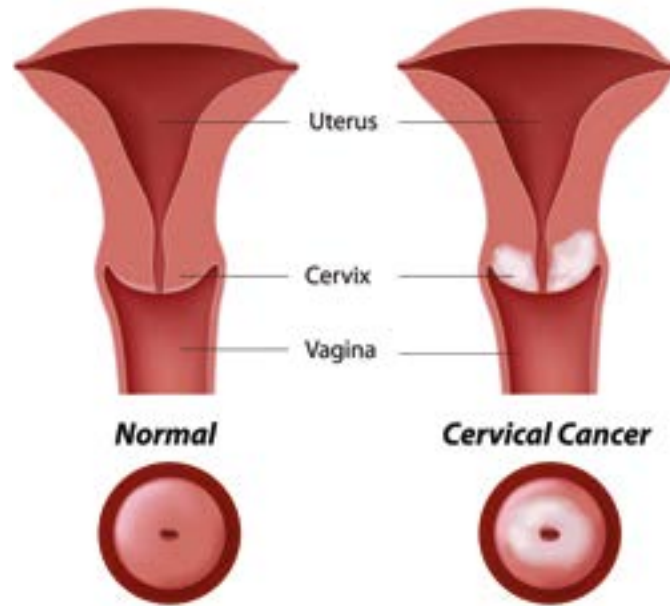
Most people with HPV do not know that they are infected as the HPV infection goes away on its own and does not cause any health problems. In cases where the HPV infection does not clear it may cause health problems, depending on the type of HPV. There are more than 100 different types of HPV, of which approximately 30 types can infect the genital area of men and women. These types can be divided into 'low-risk' and 'high-risk' types.

Low-risk HPV types may cause genital warts but do not cause cancer. Genital warts usually appear as a small bump or group of bumps in the genital areas. Warts are diagnosed by the way they look.

Persisting infection with 'high-risk' HPV types are associated with the development of cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina and penis. Your body's immune system may destroy the virus before it causes cancer but in some women the HPV infection persists. If you have a weakened immune system, caused for example by an HIV infection, you are more likely to develop health problems due to HPV.

Cancer of the cervix is the most common cancer caused by HPV. The cervix is the lower part of the uterus (womb). The cells of the cervix become infected with high-risk HPV and start growing abnormally. The changes in these cells can progress to what is known as pre-cancer.

The medical term for this is 'dysplasia' or 'cervical intraepithelial neoplasia' (CIN). This pre-cancerous lesion can become cervical cancer years after being infected.



CAN I GET TESTED FOR HPV?

The goal of getting tested for HPV is to identify women who are at risk of cervical cancer due to persisting infection with high-risk HPV. In South Africa it is currently recommended that women older than 25 years of age and all HIV-infected women should be tested for high-risk HPV.

A swab taken from the cervix is used for this test. A positive HPV test means that a woman has high-risk HPV but does not mean that a woman has cancer. Further testing (for example a Pap smear that looks at the cells of the cervix) is usually needed and possible treatment will then be determined by the doctor.

The HPV test is not used to test men for HPV infection. There is also no blood test to determine a person's 'HPV' status. Should you be worried about a possible HPV infection, it is important to be tested for other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) as well.

CAN I BE TREATED FOR HPV OR THE HEALTH PROBLEMS IT CAUSES?

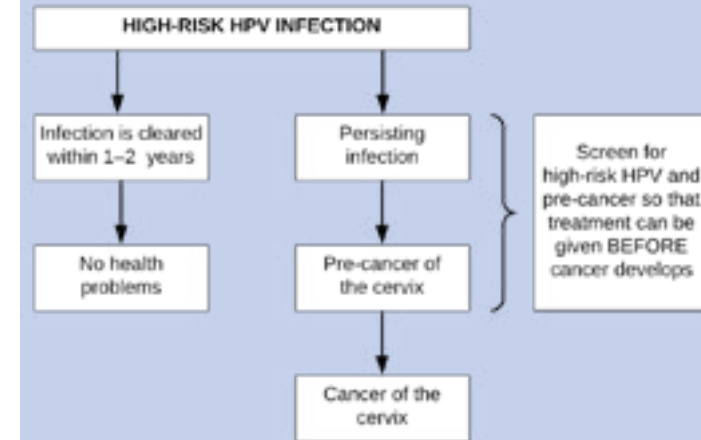
There is no treatment for HPV itself, but the health problems caused by HPV can be treated.

Genital warts may go away without treatment or increase in size or number. The doctor may prescribe topical medication to treat the warts. Surgery is a last resort for large warts or when the topical treatment does not work.

If your Pap smear shows pre-cancerous cells in the cervix, it can be treated by destroying or removing the virus-infected cells. This will prevent the pre-cancerous cells from changing into cancer of the cervix.

Other less common HPV-related cancers are also more treatable when diagnosed early. Your doctor will advise you what the appropriate treatment is.

HIGH-RISK HPV AND CANCER OF THE CERVIX



HOW DO I AVOID GETTING HPV?

There are two ways of lowering your chances of being infected with HPV:

- Use condoms every time you have sex. Condoms will lower your chances of getting HPV as well as all other sexually transmitted infections. HPV can however still infect areas that are not covered by condoms and thus do not give you full protection against HPV.
- Get the HPV vaccine. HPV vaccines are safe and effective and can help prevent men and women against warts and certain cancers including cervical cancer. Ideally, you need to be vaccinated before you start to have sex, typically in adolescence. There are two HPV vaccines available in South Africa; Cervarix® and Gardasil®. Both offer protection against cancer-associated high-risk HPV types 16 and 18. Only Gardasil® protects against genital warts. Speak to your doctor if you need more information about HPV vaccines. Women who have received the HPV vaccine still need to be screened for cervical cancer in the same way as women who have not been vaccinated.

WHAT DOES HPV MEAN FOR MY RELATIONSHIP?

A person may have had HPV for many years before it causes health problems or is diagnosed. If you or your partner are diagnosed with HPV, there is no way to know how long you have had HPV. In addition, you cannot tell whether you gave your partner HPV or whether your partner gave you HPV. HPV infection is also not necessarily a sign that one of you is having sex outside of your relationship.

If you or your partner have genital warts then you should not have sex until the warts are gone or removed. Both you and your partner should see your doctor for a check-up and to test for other STIs such as HIV.



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HPV (HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS)



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