

North Carolina Women's Hospital

Genital Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

What is the Genital Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)?

Genital Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the United States. At least 50% of sexually active people will have genital HPV at some time in their lives.

What causes HPV?

HPV is caused by a virus that affects the genital (sex organs) and rectal areas of women and men. There are approximately 100 types of HPV.

What does HPV do?

HPV can affect you in several ways. There are often no symptoms, and it goes away on its own without causing any serious health problems. However, some HPV types cause genital warts in both men and women. Some types of HPV if left untreated may lead to cervical cancer.

How does a person get HPV?

HPV is passed on through genital contact (such as oral, vaginal and anal sex). Anyone who has ever had genital contact with another person can have genital HPV. Both men and women can get it and pass it on without even realizing it because the virus often has no symptoms. There is no way to know when you or your partner first came in contact with the virus.

How is HPV detected?

The effects of HPV (such as genital warts) can often be seen during a physical health examination. A health care provider may also see signs of HPV infection from the results of a Pap smear which is done to screen for pre-cancer and cancer of the cervix. If signs of HPV are found more tests will be needed.

How do you treat HPV?

There is currently no cure for the virus itself. Most of the time your body fights off the virus on its own. There are treatments for the health problems that genital HPV can cause, like genital warts, cervical changes, and cervical cancer. Even after treatment, the virus may remain in your body. This means that you may still pass HPV to your sex partners.

How can I protect myself from getting HPV?

The best way to prevent HPV is not to have sex. If you decide to have sex limit the number of partners you have. Condoms may lower your chances of getting HPV if used the right way every time you have sex. HPV can infect areas that are not covered by a condom. Both men and women can get vaccinated to protect against the types of HPV that often cause health problems. These vaccines are given in 3 shots over 6 months. The vaccines work best when all shots are received before a person has sex with his or her first partner.

If I already have HPV what should I do?

For women it is very important to have regular Pap tests to check for problems that could develop into cervical cancer. Most women who get cervical cancer have not had regular Pap tests. It is important for men and women to talk with your sexual partner(s) about HPV and other sexually transmitted infections. There is no shame about having genital HPV. The virus is very common.

References:

CDC: <http://www.cdc.gov/hpv/Prevention.html>