

Genital Warts and Human Papilloma Virus - HPV

Description:

Genital warts are fleshy growths or lumps found around the genitals and anus. They are caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV).

Symptoms:

HPV infection is very common. Sometimes HPV infection causes visible warts. However, many people who have been exposed to the virus do not develop visible warts because their immune system keeps the virus under control. Warts are harder to treat in a person with an impaired immune system, such as someone living with HIV. Some warts may be difficult to see as they occur inside the vagina, cervix, or anus.

If you develop visible genital warts this does not necessarily mean you were infected recently as the infection may have occurred months or even years ago.

Transmission:

HPV can live in the vagina, vulva, cervix, anus or penis and sometimes the mouth or throat and is spread through direct skin to skin contact with a person infected with HPV. This occurs most commonly through sexual contact and can occur even when there are no visible warts. This explains why genital HPV infection spreads easily among sexually active people. HPV may also be passed from mother to baby during labour and birth.

Warts that occur elsewhere on the body are caused by different types of HPV. Contact with these warts does not cause genital warts.

Some people will feel upset about having HPV or genital warts. Often people feel anger toward their sexual partner, even though it is usually not possible to know exactly when or from whom the HPV was contracted. A diagnosis of genital warts does not necessarily indicate that your partner has had another partner recently.

Treatment:

If you think you have warts, or may have been exposed to genital warts and/or are worried about HPV infection, you may need to see a doctor or sexual health clinic for a checkup. In most cases, the presence of warts can be confirmed by checking the genital area. HPV infection may be present without any visible warts. There is currently no blood test or swab test available to detect HPV infection.

There is no cure for HPV infection, although in many people warts and HPV infection go away on their own without any treatment. Various treatments are available that may be useful if warts are unsightly or causing discomfort. Discuss these with a doctor or sexual health clinic. Changes in the cells of the cervix caused by HPV infection can also be treated.

Prevention:

Some types of HPV infection can be prevented by new vaccines which have been registered for use in Australia.

One of the vaccines that are licensed for use in girls and young women aged between 9 and 45 years and boys and young men aged between 9 and 26 years can also prevent the HPV infection that causes genital warts. This vaccine is available through GPs.

The National HPV Vaccination Program provides free vaccination for young women in the first year of high school. For information about the program such as eligibility and where people can be immunised, see the Queensland Health [Immunisation Program](#) website, or the [school-based vaccination program](#) website.

The use of condoms and or dental dams for all sexual contact can also reduce the transmission of HPV.

HPV and Cervical Cancer

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All women who have ever had sexual contact should commence having Pap smears between the ages of 18-20, or within two years after first sexual contact, whichever is later. This includes male to female and female to female contact. Pap smears are then routinely done every two years; or more frequently if any abnormalities are detected. The new HPV vaccines aim to protect women against infection with two types of HPV that are associated with 70% of cases of cervical cancer. This means that the vaccine will not prevent all types of HPV that cause cervical cancer, nor can it cure an HPV infection if it has previously been acquired. A regular Pap smear every two years is the most effective way of detecting cervical cell abnormalities, which may develop into cancer if left untreated.

Certain types of HPV are associated with changes in the cells of the cervix (neck of the womb) which can be detected by Pap smears. These changes have the potential to develop into cancer of the cervix if they are not treated, but in the majority of women they recover completely without treatment, and never lead to cancer. All women should have regular Pap smears to monitor for changes, whether or not they have ever had genital warts.

Help and Assistance

For more information on Genital Warts and Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), talk to:

- your local doctor
- your local sexual health clinic
- your local family planning clinic.

Other Resources

[Sexual Health website](#)

[HPV Immunisation fact sheet](#)

[National HPV Vaccination Program website](#)