

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

Description:

The human papilloma virus (HPV) is spread through direct skin to skin contact with a person infected with HPV. This occurs most commonly through sexual contact. HPV may be passed from person to person by sexual contact where there is skin to skin contact of the genital area. HPV may also be passed from mother to baby during labour and birth.

Symptoms:

HPV infection is very common. Sometimes HPV infection causes visible warts. Many people who have been exposed to the virus do not develop visible warts because their immune system keeps the virus under control.

Other people develop genital warts after exposure to HPV. This does not necessarily mean the person got the infection recently. The infection may have occurred some time in the past.

Warts are more troublesome and harder to treat in a person with an impaired immune system.

HPV is diagnosed by the presence of warts. You may have HPV infection and not be aware of this, as you may never develop warts.

Certain types of the HPV are associated with changes in the cells of the cervix (neck of the womb) which can be detected on pap smears. These changes have the potential to become cancer of the cervix if they are not treated, but in the majority of women these changes recover completely without treatment, and never lead to cancer. However, these changes need to be monitored so women should have regular Pap smears. As mentioned, even if you have never had a wart in your genital area, this does not mean that you have not been exposed to HPV. Sometimes HPV is detected on pap smears.

All women need to have a pap smear within twelve months to two years of becoming sexually active, and thereafter every two years.

Transmission:

The virus can be passed from person to person even if there are no visible warts. The virus can live in the skin for many years and during that time can be passed on through sexual contact. This explains why genital HPV infection spreads easily among sexually active people.

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

Treatment:

If you think you have warts or have been exposed to genital warts, or, if you are worried about HPV infection, it is best to go to your doctor or sexual health clinic for a check up. In most cases, the presence of warts can be confirmed by checking the genital area.

HPV infection may be present without any signs. There is currently no blood test or swab test available to detect HPV infection.

There is no cure for HPV infection.

Health Outcome:

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

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Prevention:

- It is unknown how long a person with HPV infection remains infectious or can pass the infection on to a sexual partner.
- The use of condoms for sex is encouraged. Using condoms will reduce the spread of HPV but will not completely remove the risk.
- If visible warts are treated as soon as they appear, the spread of HPV is reduced.
- Even though the warts are gone, HPV can still be living in the genital skin and it is still possible to transmit the virus to your partner.
- Spermicidal foams, creams and gels have not been shown to have any effect against HPV.

Help and Assistance

For more information on HPV, you can talk to:

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

Other Resources

[Queensland Health Sexual Health website](#)

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[Genital warts and HPV fact sheet](#)

[Human Papillomavirus \(HPV\) and immunisation fact sheet](#)

[Safe Sex fact sheet](#)