



**Think** about it.  
**Talk** about it.  
**Protect** yourself  
 and your partner.

**H**uman Papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted disease (STD) in the United States. Over 20 million women and men are infected at any one time, but most don't know it. There are many types of HPV, and most of them are harmless.

Currently, there is no cure for HPV. However, there are treatments for the diseases caused by HPV, such as genital warts and precancerous cells on the cervix.

Most people with HPV have no symptoms and will not develop any problems from the infection. Typically, within 12 months after infection occurs, the virus is no longer detectable. Infection with some types of HPV can cause genital warts. Other types of HPV can be associated with cervical and anal cancer, but this is rare. These types usually don't cause warts. Often, a person will be infected with more than one type of HPV.

### How is HPV transmitted?

HPV is spread by skin-to-skin contact, usually during sex. It is generally passed from one partner to another during vaginal and anal sex, and occasionally can infect the throat from oral sex.

HPV is spread easily during sex, even if condoms are used, and even if no genital warts are present. The virus lives in the skin of infected people usually in areas like the penis, scrotum, and vagina. Condoms do not offer much protection against HPV because the virus can often be in areas that the condom doesn't cover. Still, it is a good idea to use them because there are other STDs that condoms do prevent, such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, HIV, and hepatitis B and C. The only sure way to protect yourself from HPV is not to have sex.

### How do I know if I have HPV?

The two main ways to know if you have HPV are: if genital warts appear or from an abnormal Pap test.

If a woman has an abnormal Pap test, follow-up testing may be needed to determine if HPV is the cause.

### How can I protect myself from HPV?

Since HPV is so common and so easy to transmit, most sexually active people will have HPV infections at some point in their lives. In most people, these infections will not cause any serious problems and often clear on their own.

Both men and women should do self-exams for warts and unusual bumps around the vagina and anus. If you are a woman, the best thing you can do to protect yourself from having an HPV infection possibly turn into cervical cancer is to get the HPV vaccine and

have regular Pap tests. If you are 30 years old or older, HPV testing should be done when you get a Pap test.

### Should I get the HPV vaccine?

In 2006 the FDA approved an HPV vaccine for females ages 9-26. The vaccine protects against the strains of HPV that may cause precancerous changes in the cervix and some genital warts. The vaccine, given in 3 doses, works best when it's given to girls before they are sexually active (usually ages 9-12). Exposure to HPV is very common and happens soon after girls start sexual activity. Girls or young women, ages 13-26, may want to consider getting the vaccine. Talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner to see if the vaccine is right for you.

It's still important to get the Pap test even if the vaccine has been given. Pap tests should be done either 3 years after sexual activity begins or at age 21, whichever comes first. The HPV vaccine does not protect against pregnancy, other STDs, or HIV. Practice safer sex by using latex or polyurethane condoms or abstinence (not having sex) and talking with your partner.

### What are genital warts?

Some types of HPV can cause genital warts. Genital warts usually appear as cauliflower-like bumps or flat pink, red, or flesh-colored patches inside the vagina, on the lips around the vagina, on the penis or scrotum, around the anus, or occasionally on the belly or thighs. The affected area can itch, or feel irritated, but sometimes the warts do not cause any discomfort at all. Often, an outbreak of genital warts may occur when the immune system is weakened.

If a person is infected with HPV, it may take several months or even years for the warts to appear. Your doctor or nurse practitioner can usually identify warts during an office visit.

### What is the treatment for genital warts?

Although there is no cure for HPV, there are different treatments for genital warts. Your doctor or nurse practitioner may recommend surgical removal, freezing the warts, laser treatment, or putting medication on the warts. It often takes several visits to completely remove the warts. Once the warts are gone, the virus may still be present, and passing it to your partner is still possible.

Sometimes genital warts clear up without treatment after a few months. However, they can sometimes grow and spread through the genital area. If you think you have genital warts, talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner.

### How is HPV linked to cancer?

Some types of HPV can cause precancerous changes to the cervix in women and possible anal cancer in women and men. Most people who are infected with HPV will not get cancer.

For women, the most important thing you can do to protect yourself from cervical cancer is to get regular Pap tests. You should get a regular Pap test even if you've had the HPV vaccine. Pap tests can detect pre-cancerous cells on the cervix. If results reveal abnormal cells then follow-up tests are needed.

Smoking may also contribute to the development of cervical cancer in women who have HPV. If you are a

smoker and would like to quit, talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner or call your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Department for more information.

Both men and women who have anal sex should be aware of the symptoms of anal HPV infection. These may include bleeding from the rectum during bowel movements or during anal sex, unusual bumps around the anus, or pain during anal sex. If you have any of these symptoms, or if you have had anal warts in the past, talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner.

### What about HPV and pregnancy?

HPV does not affect a woman's ability to get pregnant and is rarely a concern during pregnancy. In some women who have HPV, pregnancy may cause an outbreak of genital warts. Pregnancy can also cause warts to grow larger than usual. In rare cases, if large warts obstruct the birth canal, a Caesarian section may be necessary. This is unlikely to happen if you are receiving regular prenatal care and treatment for your warts.

### What should I tell my partner if I have been diagnosed with HPV?

HPV can be a difficult topic to discuss with a partner because, aside from not having sex, there is no reliable way to prevent HPV transmission. When you tell your partner you have HPV, you may want to let him or her know that this is a very common virus that many sexually active people carry, and that, in most people, it does not cause serious problems. Remember: It is impor-

tant to use condoms to prevent the transmission of other STDs. You may also want to ask your doctor or nurse practitioner about being tested for other STDs

### What if I'm under 18?

If you are 12 years old or older, you can get a Pap test and be seen, evaluated, and treated for STDs (and other sexual health concerns), without a parent's permission. California State law requires that Kaiser Permanente must protect your privacy.

#### Additional resources

- National HPV and Cervical Cancer Prevention Resource Center [ashastd.org/hpvcrc](http://ashastd.org/hpvcrc)
- Connect to our Web site at [members.kp.org](http://members.kp.org) to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- With a *Kaiser Permanente Healthphone Directory*, you can choose messages to hear on Kaiser Permanente Healthphone (1-800-332-7563; TTY: 1-800-777-9059). Request a Directory from your Health Education Center or Department or download a copy at [members.kp.org](http://members.kp.org). (Search "Healthphone".)