



Whatcom County Health Department

FACT SHEET: HUMAN PAPILOMAVIRUS

What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is a large family of viruses that infect the skin, often causing irregular cell growth or warts. There are more than 60 types of HPV. Some types of the virus are transmitted by nonsexual personal contact and cause common skin warts. Several types of HPV are spread by sex and primarily infect the genitals or anal area. Of the sexually transmitted types, some cause cancer and pre-cancerous changes of the cervix, anus, or the skin of the penis or female genitals. Other types cause warts of the genitals or anal area. Genital warts are the most common symptoms of HPV infection. However, most HPV infections do not lead to either warts or cancer; most infections go away by themselves, without causing any symptoms.

How common is HPV?

- HPV infections are believed to be the most common of all sexually transmitted diseases (STDs); most sexually active persons get at least one HPV infection, usually without ever knowing it.
- At any time, somewhere around 20 million to 40 million Americans are infected with sexually transmitted types of HPV, and the frequency of infection and disease appears to be increasing.

What are the symptoms of HPV infection?

- Most HPV infections cause no symptoms at all. However, some infections cause warts of the genital or anal areas and others cause cancer or pre-cancerous changes.

1. Genital Warts:

Genital warts range from cauliflower-like growths that are easily seen to smooth bumps or flat, almost invisible growths. Some warts are hard and rough and others soft and fleshy. They are painless, but may bleed easily or itch. Warts usually remain small (less than a quarter inch in size), but very large warts

(sometimes an inch or more across) sometimes occur if warts are not treated when small. Warts usually appear a few weeks or up to 3 months after catching HPV, but sometimes warts may first appear many months or even a few years after catching the virus.

2. Cancer and Related Problems:

The types of HPV that cause cancer and pre-cancerous changes are called "high risk" types. Most infections with high-risk HPV types do not lead to cancer; the immune system is able to remove the virus before it causes problems. When it does occur, cancer takes time to develop. First the virus causes abnormal cells to grow. It usually takes 5 years to 10 years or more for cancer to develop. This is why Pap smears are so important for women; a Pap smear can detect these abnormal cell changes so that they can be treated before they lead to cancer. At this stage, the disease is easily cured by minor surgery to remove the abnormal cells. Therefore, a woman who gets regular Pap smears every one to three years is almost 100% protected from getting cervical cancer.

How is HPV transmitted?

- Genital HPV is only transmitted through skin-to-skin contact during sex; infected skin of one person rubs against the skin of the other person and transfers the virus.
- Almost all infections are acquired through vaginal or anal intercourse, but rarely HPV may be transmitted by oral-genital sex.
- The male condom is not as effective at preventing HPV transmission as it is for the prevention of other STDs because it does not prevent all skin-to-skin contact during sex.
- The female condom provides wider coverage and therefore might offer greater protection.





Whatcom County Health Department

FACT SHEET: HUMAN PAPILOMAVIRUS

- Most infections do not have symptoms—warts or Pap smear abnormalities—but transmission of the virus is possible even though there are no visible signs of infection.
- Infants born to infected mothers may become infected, usually in the mouth or throat.

How do I avoid HPV infection?

- Abstinence from all sexual activity is the surest way to avoid becoming infected with HPV.
- The next surest way is to limit sexual contact to one uninfected partner who only has sex with you (mutual monogamy).
- For those choosing to be sexually active, condoms should be used correctly and consistently to minimize transmission.
- Avoid sexual contact with a new partner if you or your partner has untreated, visible warts on or near the genital area, or if either partner has newly diagnosed Pap smear abnormalities.
- Before having sex, talk with your partner(s) about HPV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Negotiate a risk reduction strategy with them that feels comfortable to both of you.
- You should notify your current sex partner if you have HPV. If you have newly diagnosed genital warts, you should also inform any partner you had sex with in the 3 months before your warts appeared.

How do I find out if I have genital HPV?

- Genital warts usually are diagnosed just by examining them carefully; an experienced health care provider usually can tell whether a bump is a wart by looking at it, sometimes using a magnifying glass.

What is the treatment for genital HPV infection?

- No treatment is recommended for most HPV infections.
- Treatment is only recommended if there are visible warts or Pap smear abnormalities.
- No antibiotics or other drugs kill HPV; treatment depends on destroying or removing abnormal tissues..
- Even when these tissues are removed or destroyed, HPV often persists in surrounding areas. Therefore, although the symptoms of HPV can be treated, HPV infections themselves usually cannot be cured.

How does HPV affect pregnancy?

- A mother with genital warts can pass the infection to her infant during birth.
- Genital warts sometimes enlarge during pregnancy.
- Some treatments may harm the baby in the womb and must be avoided during pregnancy.

