

Patient Information:

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) Genital Warts Questions and Answers

Warts in all body locations are caused by the human papilloma virus. Over 100 types of HPV have been identified, and approximately 40 of these types cause sexually transmitted diseases in the genital area. HPV infection is, by far, the most common sexually transmitted disease (STD) with an estimated 1/3 of sexually active adults in the U.S. currently or previously infected. The 15-30 year old age group has the highest incidence of infection. The virus is highly contagious with some studies estimating a 50% risk of infection from a single act of unprotected intercourse with a partner with visible genital HPV. Although condoms provide some protection, they may not be as effective in preventing HPV infection compared to some STDs, because of the ability of the virus to grow in areas not protected by the condom.

How is Genital HPV Diagnosed?

The most visible form of HPV infection is genital warts, also known as condyloma acuminata. These fleshy growths may appear singly or in groups in the genital area and/or around the anus, usually cause no symptoms, and often increase in number and/or size as time passes. Visible genital warts, which make up only about 10% of all genital HPV infections, often have a characteristic appearance and can be diagnosed on visual inspection by an experienced practitioner. Subclinical infection with HPV is common in both men and women. Infected areas appear like normal skin on visual inspection and can only be seen by applying 5% acetic acid (white vinegar) and using magnification.

The Pap Test is helpful in detecting subclinical HPV infections of the cervix in women. These invisible lesions (as well as urethral HPV in men and vaginal/cervical HPV in women) may serve as hidden sources of infection for sexual partners.

How is HPV Transmitted?

The vast majority of genital HPV infections are transmitted by genital skin to skin or sexual contact. Although less common, the virus can infect the mouth following oral-genital contact with an infected person. The incubation period, the time from initial exposure to the development of infection, can be as long as 12

months. Because of the long incubation period and the subtle nature of most infections, it is often impossible to know how long the infection has been present. Genital HPV infection can be found on the penis, scrotum, urethra, perianal, and rectal areas in men and on the vulva, vagina, cervix, perianal, and rectal areas in women. HPV can be spread through skin-to-skin contact of infected areas not covered by a condom.

How is Genital HPV Treated?

The goal of HPV treatment is to eradicate actively growing, infectious genital HPV and to prevent spread to uninfected partners. No treatment has been shown to totally eliminate the virus and result in a "cure". Latent virus (inactive, invisible) remains in most cases and may cause recurrences of active infection.

In most cases the individual's own immune system will eventually suppress the reactivation of latent virus. It is not known whether latent HPV can be transmitted to an uninfected partner, therefore it is important to use condoms consistently even if there is no visible infection.

Treatments for genital HPV exert their effect by destroying infected cells. Available treatments at SHC for external HPV include podophyllin and liquid nitrogen. Vaginal and cervical infections in women, urethral infections in men, and rectal infections in men and women require referral to a specialist for treatment.

After Treatment, How Do I Know that the Infection is Gone?

Recent evidence indicates that the HPV infection is often eradicated by the immune system.

The passage of time is the only means of determining if the immune system is suppressing active viral growth. The passage of 1 year without recurrence makes it less likely that recurrence from a previous HPV infection will occur. Previous genital HPV infection provides no protection or immunity against future infection from other genital HPV types. It is not proven that treatment of active HPV infection eliminates the risk of future complications.

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

Genital Warts

What are the complications of Genital HPV Infection?

Since genital HPV infection is, in almost all cases, a sexually transmitted disease, the risk of infection with other STDs at the time of HPV exposure is increased.

It is important that a person diagnosed with genital HPV infection be tested for other STDs including chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV infection. Sexual partners of a person diagnosed with genital HPV should also be examined for genital HPV and tested for other STDs.

Some type of HPV cause cancer of the cervix in women. Although only a small percentage of all women infected with HPV develop precancerous changes, it is important that women with a history of genital HPV or a history of exposure have yearly Pap Tests to screen for these changes. Since genital HPV infection is very common and often difficult to diagnose, we strongly encourage all sexually active women to have yearly Pap Tests. Genital HPV infection does not cause infertility. Pregnancy can, however, cause an increase in the size and number of genital warts.

How can HPV infection be prevented?

The most reliable way of avoiding infection with genital HPV and other STDs is sexual abstinence including skin to skin genital contact. The most effective alternatives are to have a single life-long sexual partner who has also had no other partners nor history of intimate skin to skin contact with other partners and to be immunized with the HPV vaccine. It is important to always use a condom and to be sure the condom is in place **before** any skin-to-skin contact occurs. Remember, **there is no test to tell that a sexual partner does not have HPV infection.**

It is also best not to borrow or share used towels, washcloths or razors from others since they may play a part in the infrequent nonsexual transmission of genital HPV.

What about the HPV vaccine?

A vaccine can now protect females from the four types of HPV that cause most cervical cancers and genital warts. The vaccine is recommended for 11 and 12 year-old girls. It is also recommended for girls and women age 13 through 26 who have not yet been vaccinated or completed the vaccine series.

The FDA may soon release the vaccine to women of all ages and men. The vaccine is recommended for women who have had an abnormal pap test because it provides protection against additional strains of the virus.

What should I do if I have been diagnosed with genital warts?

Don't shave in affected areas until genital warts have completely resolved. Shaving can spread warts quickly. Stop smoking for overall health but also because smoking decreases immune functioning which might mean a longer time for recovery.