

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

Human papillomavirus, or HPV, is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the United States. About 80 percent of women will get at least one type of HPV at some point in their lifetime. It is usually spread through vaginal, oral, or anal sex. Many women do not know they have HPV, because it usually has no symptoms and usually goes away on its own. Some types of HPV can cause illnesses such as genital warts or cervical cancer. There is a vaccine to help you prevent HPV.

Q: What is HPV?

A: HPV is the name for a group of viruses that includes more than 100 types. More than 40 types of HPV can be passed through sexual contact. The types that infect the genital area are called genital HPV.

Q: How do you get HPV?

A: HPV is spread through:

- Vaginal, oral, or anal sex. HPV can be spread even if there are no symptoms. This means you can get HPV from someone who has no signs or symptoms.
- Genital touching. A man does not need to ejaculate (come) for HPV to spread. HPV can also be passed between women who have sex with women.
- Childbirth from a woman to her baby

Q: What are the signs and symptoms of HPV?

A: Most people with HPV do not have any symptoms. This is one reason why women need regular Pap tests. Experts recommend that you get your first Pap test at age 21. The Pap test can find changes on the cervix caused by HPV. If you are a woman between ages 30 and 65, your doctor might also do an HPV test with your Pap test every five years. This is a DNA test that detects most types of HPV.

Q: Can HPV be cured?

A: No, HPV has no cure. Most often, HPV goes away on its own. If HPV does not go away on its own, there are treatments for the genital warts and cervical cell changes caused by HPV.

Q: How can I prevent HPV?

A: There are two ways to prevent HPV. One way is to get an HPV vaccine. The other way to prevent HPV or any STI is to not have sexual contact with another person.

If you do have sex, lower your risk of getting an STI with the following steps:

- **Use condoms.** Condoms are the best way to prevent STIs when you have sex. Although HPV can also happen in female and male genital areas that are not protected by condoms, research shows that condom use is linked to lower cervical cancer rates. The HPV vaccine does not replace or decrease the need to wear condoms. Make sure to put the condom on before the penis touches the vagina, mouth, or anus. Also, other methods of birth control, such as birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms, will not protect you from STIs.
- **Get tested.** Be sure you and your partner are tested for STIs. Talk to each other about the test results before you have sex.
- **Be monogamous.** Having sex with just one partner can lower your risk for STIs. After being tested for STIs, be faithful to each other. That means that you have sex only with each other and no one else.
- **Limit your number of sex partners.** Your risk of getting STIs goes up with the number of partners you have.
- **Do not douche.** Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protect you from infection. This may increase your risk of getting STIs.

• **Do not abuse alcohol or drugs.** Drinking too much alcohol or using drugs increases risky behavior and may put you at risk of sexual assault and possible exposure to STIs.

The steps work best when used together. No single step can protect you from every single type of STI.

Q: What is the HPV vaccine?

A: Three different types of HPV vaccines — Cervarix, Gardasil, and Gardasil 9 — are approved by the Food and Drug Administration to prevent HPV and related diseases. All types of the HPV vaccine are approved for girls and women. The HPV vaccines Gardasil and Gardasil 9 help prevent one type of HPV-related cancer and genital warts in boys and men.

Q: Do I need to get the HPV vaccine?

A: Maybe. The HPV vaccine works best when you get it before you have any type of sexual contact with anyone else.

- HPV vaccines are approved for girls ages 9 through 26.
- Girls should get three doses of the HPV vaccine by 11 or 12 years old.
- Girls and women 13 through 26 years old can get vaccinated if they did not get any or all three doses when they were younger.
- The HPV vaccine is not recommended for pregnant women.

For more information...

For more information on HPV, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Cancer Institute (NCI), NIH, HHS
800-422-6237 • www.cancer.gov

National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention (NCHHSTP), CDC, HHS
800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov/nchhstp

American Sexual Health Association
919-361-8400 • www.ashasexualhealth.org

Planned Parenthood
800-230-7526 • www.plannedparenthood.org

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