

What You Should Know About Human Papillomavirus

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted disease (STD) in the United States. At least half of all sexually active Americans will get HPV at some point in their lives. It is common in young women and men in their late teens and early 20s. There is no cure for HPV, and certain types can lead to cervical cancer—that's why it is very important to prevent it.

What Is HPV?

Human papillomavirus is a common STD that spreads through vaginal, anal, or oral sex. There are 40 types of genital HPV that affect men and women. You cannot see HPV, and there are often no symptoms. Most people with HPV don't even know they have it.

Certain types of HPV can cause genital warts or cancer. In women, it can cause cancer of the cervix (the passageway between the vagina and uterus). That is why it is very important to be screened for cervical cancer, which your health care professional can do with a Pap test (also called a Pap smear). You should have a Pap test done once a year.

Can HPV Be Treated?

There is no cure for HPV. Most of the time, your body fights the virus on its own. If the infection causes genital warts or cervical cancer, there are treatments for these problems, but not for HPV. Even after these conditions are treated, HPV can stay in your body and be passed on to sex partners. Because there is no cure for HPV and it is so common among sexually active people, preventing it is your best defense.

How Is HPV Prevented?

The only way to avoid all STDs (including HPV) is not to have sex. If you choose to be sexually active, you can help prevent HPV and other STDs by using condoms each time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Also, limit the number of sex partners you have. The more partners you have, the more likely you could become infected.

In addition to practicing safe sex, there is an optional vaccine that protects against the 4 main types of HPV that



A new vaccine is now available for protection against some types of HPV.

cause cervical cancer and genital warts. Girls can have their first shot when they are aged 11-12. It is given at such a young age to make sure girls are protected from HPV before they become sexually active. Women aged 13-26 can get the vaccine if they have not yet had sex or if they recently had sex for the first time. Women in this age group who have genital warts, had an abnormal Pap test result, or have already had HPV can also be vaccinated to protect them from getting other types of HPV. Pregnant women and women over the age of 26 should not get the vaccine.

The HPV vaccine only prevents you from getting *some* types of HPV. It does not prevent you from getting all types of HPV, or other STDs like chlamydia, gonorrhea, or HIV. If you have been vaccinated, you should still have Pap tests done every year because the vaccine does not protect against *all* types of HPV that can cause cervical cancer.

Understanding HPV

People can have HPV for a long time without knowing. Be sure to talk honestly with your partner and your health care professional about HPV and other STDs, and take preventive measures.