



The Center for Young Women's Health
Children's Hospital Boston
www.youngwomenshealth.org

Human Papillomavirus (HPV): A Guide for Teens

HPV, short for human papillomavirus, is a group of over 100 different kinds of viruses, including the virus that causes warts on hands and feet. This question and answer guide is about the sexually transmitted kind of HPV that causes problems such as genital warts and changes to a women's cervix. If you are sexually active, or thinking about becoming sexually active, your best protection is to learn the facts about how HPV is spread and how to prevent getting it.

What is HPV?

HPV is one of the most common sexually transmitted diseases. It is also the leading cause of pre-cancerous changes of the cervix and cancer of the cervix. HPV also causes genital warts.

Who can be infected with HPV?

At least 1 in every 3 sexually active young women has had a genital HPV infection. Any sexually active person—no matter what color, race, gender or sexual orientation—can get HPV. Although HPV is mainly spread by sex, if a mother is infected with the HPV virus, her newborn baby may become infected too. The baby can become infected during the birth as a result of a vaginal delivery.

How do you get HPV or genital warts?

HPV and genital warts are usually spread by *direct* skin-to-skin contact during vaginal, anal, or oral sex with *someone who has this infection*.

What can happen to me if I get the HPV virus?

If you get the HPV virus, it is possible that it may cause one of the following:

- The infected area of your body remains totally normal (called latent or inactive infection). In this case, your body controls the virus and you may never know about it, but you can still give the infection to others.
- In some cases, your body may be able to clear the infection and the HPV virus goes away.
- Visible bumps, called genital warts, can be seen in your genital area. They almost never lead to cancer.
- The virus causes changes in the cells of your cervix. These changes can be seen as "abnormal" changes in your [Pap test](#). These changes can sometimes lead to cervical cancer if they are not detected.

You are at greater risk of getting HPV if:

- You became sexually active at an early age.
- You or your sexual partner has had many different sexual partners at any time.
- You or any of your sexual partners have had a history of sexually transmitted diseases.
- Your sexual partner did not wear a condom.

How would I know if I had HPV or genital warts?

Sometimes it's hard to know if you have HPV. Although genital warts are usually seen on, around, or inside your vagina or anus (the opening where bowel movements leave your body), they may be too small to see without a microscope. Other reasons why warts are often not noticed are because they are usually the color of your skin and painless. Only rarely do they cause symptoms such as pain or bleeding. An abnormal Pap test can be the first sign of a possible HPV infection. This is why it is important to have a yearly Pap test *after* you have become sexually active *or* when you are 21 years old.

What do genital warts look like?

Genital warts are growths on your skin that look like tiny bumps. They are usually in or around the vagina, anus, on the cervix, or on the inside of the thigh. They may be raised or flat, small or large. There can be only one wart or more than one in the same area. Warts can be pink or flesh-colored, red or brown. Some bumps grow together and look like a cauliflower.

When should I go to see my health care provider?

If you notice any unusual growths, bumps, or skin changes on or near your vagina, vulva (the outside area surrounding your vagina), or anus. Also, if you have any unusual itching around or inside your vagina or if your sex partner(s) tells you that he or she has genital HPV or genital warts, you should seek help.

What is the treatment for genital warts?

Treatments for HPV range from acid medicines to creams to [laser therapy](#). The treatment will remove visible warts and unwanted symptoms such as itchiness. The type of treatment your doctor recommends will depend on many things such as the amount, location and size of the warts. Other factors to consider about different treatments are cost and side effects. It's important to talk with your health care provider about treatment choices and what type of follow-up you will need, so that you can keep your symptoms under control. Here are things to discuss with your health care provider:

- Have your health care provider (HCP) explain the different kinds of available treatment.
- Ask your HCP how often you will need to return for follow-up.
- Do **NOT** use over-the-counter "wart medicine" on genital warts. (These medicines are not meant for the very sensitive skin around your genital area).
- Tell your HCP if you think you could be pregnant so that the right treatment is used.

Will I always have HPV?

It was believed that if you had HPV you would always carry the virus, but because of new medical research, we now know that in many cases a person who has a strong immune system may actually be able to clear HPV without treatment. But there is still a lot that we don't know about this virus. You can become infected with HPV at any time or at any age, so your best bet to avoid getting HPV or other sexually transmitted diseases is to use protection!

How can I prevent or lower my chances of getting HPV or genital warts?

The safest way to prevent getting a STD like HPV is to NOT have sex. If you are having sex, it is important to know that you can reduce your risk of infection by *having sex with only one partner who only has sex with you*. Using condoms each time you have sex gives you some protection. But condoms don't always prevent infection since they don't cover a man's scrotum area. The scrotum area (the sack where the testicles are located) can become infected with HPV. Remember some warts may be so tiny that you may not notice them and it just takes skin contact to get the virus. The virus can stay in the skin even after treatment and in some cases the warts can return even months after treatment.

Is it normal to feel upset about having HPV or genital warts?

Yes. Lots of people feel very worried. Some women may also be upset with their partner. It is important to share your feelings and concerns with your health care provider.

If you are worried about HPV or genital warts, remember:

- The HPV virus can be managed.
- The most serious problem related to some types of HPV is cervical cancer, and it can be prevented if you have early treatment and follow-up.
- By learning about HPV, you will be able to understand your infection and realize it's very important to have regular checkups.

You are not alone! Millions of Americans have been infected with the HPV virus. For most people, the virus can be controlled with treatment prescribed by your health care provider and in time it goes away.

If you think you might have HPV, contact your health care provider.

GLOSSARY

Laser therapy - (also called "laser vaporization") a type of surgical procedure that uses a laser beam (a very strong light) to remove genital warts.



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