



Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

What you should know

This handout explains human papillomavirus (HPV) including causes, types, prevention, treatment, and resources to learn more.

What is the human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is a virus that is very common. In fact, most men and women are infected with HPV at some time in their lives.

There are about 100 types of HPV. Some HPV types only infect the genitals/hands/toes and may cause warts. Some cause mild changes in cervical cells that do not turn into cancer. And, some cause changes that may become cervical cancer if present for many years. The types of HPV that are found in the genital areas are usually passed on during sexual contact (sexually transmitted). HPV types that cause warts on the hands or feet do not cause genital warts or cervical cell changes. Most times, genital HPV types do not spread outside the genital area.

How do you find out if you have HPV?

There are no blood tests that tell us if you have ever been exposed to HPV. We suggest you have Pap tests at the recommended intervals. Have any new bumps or lumps checked out by your provider.

Can a male find out if he has the cell changing-types of HPV?

Research has shown that the HPV test usually shows false negative results in men. This is because it is difficult to get a good cell sample to test from the thick skin on the penis.

Most people will not have visible symptoms if they are exposed to HPV. Therefore, for most, the virus is subclinical (invisible). This is especially true for males. If a male were exposed to the cell-changing types of HPV, he would be unlikely to have symptoms. If there are no symptoms for males, it is hard to test for it.

Most of the time, men will not have any health risks such as cancer with the "high-risk" types of HPV. It is the female's cervix that needs to be monitored.

How can a person get the types of HPV that cause cell changes?

- Any person who is sexually active can be exposed and get the cell-changing types of HPV.
- Most people are exposed to the cell-changing types of HPV at some point, but not everyone (especially males) will actually have abnormal cell changes (dysplasia).
- The types of HPV that cause abnormal cell changes are usually spread by direct skin-to-skin contact during vaginal, anal, or possibly through oral sex, with someone who has this infection.
- The cell-changing types of HPV are most likely to be given to a partner when dysplasia is actually present.
- Very little is known about passing subclinical HPV to sex partners. Some experts think it may be less contagious than when the cell changes are present.
- The types of HPV that cause abnormal cell changes do not typically cause symptoms on other body parts such as the hands.
- Recent research studies have shown a link between a cell-changing type of HPV and some rare head and neck cancers, but there is not much evidence that oral sex transmits this type of HPV.

How can someone reduce the risk of getting HPV?

Anyone who is sexually active can come across this common virus. Ways to reduce the risk are:

- Do not have sex with anyone.
- Have sex only with one partner who has sex only with you. People who have many sex partners are at higher risk of getting other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

- If you or your partner currently has abnormal cell changes, do not have sexual activity until after the cells have been treated or have self-resolved. This may help to lower the risk of transmission.
- Use condoms (rubbers) the right way from start to finish each time you have sex. Condoms may help provide minimal protection, but only for the skin that is covered by the condom. Condoms do not cover all genital skin, so they don't give 100% protection.
- Use spermicidal foams, creams and jellies along with condoms, not in place of condoms. Foams, creams and jellies are not proven to work against HPV, but they do work against some other STIs.

If someone was exposed to the types of HPV that can cause abnormal cell changes, it would be unlikely that he or she would become re-infected with those same types since immunity will be set-up at some point. Realize that most people are exposed to one or more HPV types in their lifetime, and most will never even know it because they will not have visible symptoms. And, it is important for partners to understand the "entire picture" about HPV so that both people can make informed decisions based on facts, not fear or misconceptions.

How are abnormal cells treated?

Currently, there is no treatment to cure HPV. There is no cure for any virus at this point. However, there are several treatment options for treating the abnormal cells. Sometimes treatment may not even be needed for mild cervical dysplasia. These cells can heal on their own and your health care provider will just want to monitor your cervix. HPV may then be in a latent (sleeping) state, but it is unknown if it is totally gone or just not detectable.

The goal of any treatment will be to remove the abnormal cells. This may also end up removing most of the cells with the HPV in them. If the abnormal cells are treated, or if they have healed on their own, it may possibly help reduce the risk of transmission to a partner who may have never been exposed to the cell-changing types of HPV. When choosing what treatment to use, your health care provider will take into account:

- The location of the abnormal cells.
- The size of the lesions on the cervix.

Questions?

Call 206-598-5500

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC Clinic staff are also available to help at any time.

Women's Health Care Center:
206-598-5500

General Internal Medicine Center:
206-598-8750

Family Medical Center:
206-598-4055

Maternal and Infant Care Center:
206-598-4070

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- The degree or severity of the Pap test results.
- The degree or severity of the colposcopy and biopsy results.
- Your HPV test results (if this test was needed).
- Your age and pregnancy status.
- Your prior treatment history.
- Your treatment preferences and their own.

There are a variety of treatments for cervical dysplasia:

- Cryotherapy (freezing the cells with liquid nitrogen).
- LEEP (Loop Electrosurgical Excision Procedure).
- Conization (also called cone biopsy).
- Laser (not as widely used today due to high cost, lack of availability, and limited number of doctors who are trained to use it. LEEP is more commonly used).
- No treatment at all since even mild abnormal cell changes may resolve without treatment. Your health care provider may just monitor your cervix by either doing a colposcopy, repeat Pap test, or a test for HPV.

Is it normal to feel upset about HPV?

Yes, it is normal. Some people feel very upset. They feel ashamed, fearful, confused, less attractive, or less interested in sex. They feel angry with their sex partner(s), even though it is usually not possible to know exactly when or from whom the virus was spread. Some people are afraid that they will get cancer, or that they will never be able to find a sexual partner again.

It is normal to have all, some, or none of these feelings. It may take some time, but it is important to know that it is still possible to have a normal, healthy life, even with HPV.

Where can I learn more about HPV?

- American Social Health Association (www.ashastd.org).
- American Society for Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology (www.asccp.org).
- Your UWMC outpatient clinic healthcare provider.