

## Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI). Anyone who is sexually active is at risk of getting HPV. Most people don't have symptoms or know they're infected. They can give it to others without knowing.

In most cases, HPV is harmless and goes away on its own. With some types of HPV, you may have:

- Genital warts. These show up as small bumps or groups of bumps around the genitals.
- Cancer of the mouth or throat, vagina, cervix, penis, or anus.
- An abnormal pap smear (cervical screening). This happens when HPV is present in your screening results. Having HPV on your results doesn't mean you have genital warts or cancer. You may just need to get pap smears more often.

### How HPV Spreads

HPV spreads easily from sexual, skin-to-skin contact. This can happen when the vulva, vagina, cervix, penis, or anus touches an infected person's genitals, mouth, or throat.

### Risk Factors

- A weak immune system.
- More than 1 sexual partner.
- Not getting the HPV vaccine.
- Having sex before the age of 18. You are more likely to catch a high-risk strain of HPV.

## Testing for HPV

Routine testing for HPV is not standard because it's so common. However, testing can be done if there are problems. Some tests can find cervical cancer caused by HPV, but there are no tests to find HPV in the mouth or throat.

HPV testing is not recommended if you:

- Were born male.
- Are a teen.
- Were born female and are under the age of 30.

## Prevention

Not having sex (abstinence) is the best way to avoid HPV and other STIs. If you do have sex, some of these things may help prevent the spread of HPV:

- Limit your number of sexual partners. Know your partner(s) and their sexual history.
- **Use a condom** every time you have sex for the whole time you have sex.
- Have an extra condom with you in case the one you're using breaks.
- Get tested for other STIs and HIV. HPV can increase your risk for other infections.
- Get regular cervical screenings if you're between the ages of 21 and 65.
- Get the HPV vaccine. It helps protect against some types of HPV-related cancers and some HPV-related diseases, like genital and anal warts and wart-like growths on the vocal cords.
  - Children ages 9 to 14 get a total of 2 shots. Dose 2 is given six months after dose 1. The vaccine works best when it's given before your child is sexually active.
  - Teens and young adults ages 15 to 26 get a total of 3 shots:
    - Dose 2 is given **one** month after dose 1.
    - Dose 3 is given **six** months after dose 1.
  - The HPV vaccine is safe and does not cause any serious side effects. Common mild side effects are pain where the shot was given, a low-grade fever, and tiredness (Picture 1).



**Picture 1** The vaccine is given in the upper arm. This area may hurt after the shot.