

## HUMAN PAPILLOMA VIRUS (HPV)

### What is it and how did I get it?

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is a common sexually transmitted infection, also known as genital warts or condyloma. There are over 100 strains of HPV and some are serious (not all strains affect the genital area). HPV is spread by direct skin to skin contact during oral, vaginal or anal sex. Warts or an abnormal Pap test may not show up for months or years after exposure to the virus so it may be impossible to know where and when it was picked up. Some people never get warts, even though they have the virus. The doctor diagnoses warts by seeing them or by the Pap test results.

### What can happen when I have HPV?

Once you are exposed to the virus, there are 3 things that might happen:

1. *Latent Infection:* At this stage most people will not know they have HPV. This means that a person has the virus but there are no warts or other signs of infection. The virus can still be spread to others during skin to skin contact even if there are no symptoms. The immune system works to clear the virus from the body, and it is believed this can take one to two years. There is no treatment available at this stage. In about two thirds of female cases, the virus eventually 'shows' itself by growing warts in the genital area or by abnormal cells showing on a Pap test

2. *Warts:* Warts are diagnosed by their appearance. Warts can be alone or in a cluster, painless or itchy and uncomfortable. For women, warts can appear anywhere in the anal or genital area, inside the vagina and on the cervix. For men, warts can appear anywhere in the anal or genital area and/or inside the urethra (tube that carries urine). Tests such as a urethroscopy (looking inside the urethra) or cystoscopy (looking at the bladder) can be done but are not that useful. Warts can show up fairly soon after exposure or months/years after the virus is picked up.

A very small number of the 100 or so strains of HPV infections progress to cancer if left untreated. Before cancer ever develops, abnormal cells usually show on a woman's cervix on a Pap test. There is no screening test for cancerous changes in men.

3. *Cancerous changes:* These can happen in men and women if they have one of the serious strains of HPV. The female cervix is the most common place and a Pap test will show if there are cell changes on the cervix caused by HPV. Cancer can occur anywhere in the

genital or anal area. Cancer usually takes 5-10 years to develop and pre-cancerous changes (abnormal cells) will show on Pap tests long before cancer is seen. These pre-cancerous changes can be treated and cancer can be prevented. This is why it is important for all women to have regular Pap tests. If a woman keeps having abnormal Pap tests, a referral may be made to a specialist for a colposcopy. This test uses a special magnifying microscope to examine the cervix and a tissue sample (biopsy) may be taken at that time. DNA testing can tell what strain of HPV it is. There is no screening test or approved HPV DNA testing for men. Men with one of the more serious HPV strains are at greater risk for penile and anal cancers. HPV is not believed to cause prostate cancer.

HPV infection will be different for each person.

### Treatment

*Warts:* Warts that can be seen can be removed with cryotherapy (freezing off the wart with liquid nitrogen) or with special medication (trichloroacetic acid, Wartec, Condyline) applied directly to the wart by a health professional. This might take a several treatments. ***This removes only the wart and not the virus.*** If there are lots of warts, a specialist's referral may be needed for laser treatment or surgery. In some cases the warts can disappear on their own, as the immune system tries to get rid of the virus.

*Pre Cancerous Changes:* The DNA testing is available through some private labs and can be ordered by a family doctor. DNA testing is not covered by your health card. Treatment can then be decided on. Treatment may include cryotherapy, laser therapy or electrocautery to remove infected cells.

For men, any changes of the skin in the genital area should be examined by a doctor.

### How can I prevent getting cancer if I have HPV?

To help prevent HPV from ever progressing to cancer, you should:

- stop smoking (smoking can increase the risk of cancer of the cervix in women with HPV)
- use condoms to avoid getting other sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- get tested regularly for STIs and get treated right away if you have an infection

- get lots of rest, regular exercise and eat a healthy diet to help keep your immune system healthy
- have regular Pap tests

### **What about sexual partners?**

When HPV is found, all sexual partners should be examined. This is especially important for women, as HPV is very contagious and can be spread even when no warts are visible.

### **Pregnancy**

Most pregnant women who have had genital warts in the past will probably not have any complications or problems during a pregnancy or birth.

If you have warts during pregnancy, they can grow in size and number or bleed due to the hormonal changes. This could make delivery more difficult.

HPV can cause growths in the throats of infants exposed to the virus during childbirth, but this is extremely rare.

### **Prevention**

Any person who is sexually active can come in contact with this common virus. Sex at an early age and with multiple partners increases the risk.

Condoms are important as they help to reduce the risk of transmission of HPV, HIV and other STIs. They cannot

prevent HPV transmission completely as they do not cover all the areas of skin that could be infected.

A vaccine to prevent HPV infection in females is now available for women ages 9-26. It is a series of 3 doses and available at a family doctor. Vaccines to control the virus after you have it are in the trial stage now, but experts say it will be a few years before they are available to the public.

### **Where Can I get More Information?**

Here are some resources to help answer your questions:

- American Social Health Association (ASHA)  
P. O. Box 13827, Research Triangle Park  
NC, USA 27709-3827  
[www.ashastd.org](http://www.ashastd.org)  
(online HPV magazine available)
- Aldara Pregnancy Healthline  
(Aldara is a new treatment for genital warts)  
1-800-670-6126
- Public Health Agency of Canada  
[http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new\\_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html)  
Search HPV vaccine

### ***Remember:***

**Condom use will help prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections, including Hepatitis B and HIV.**

**For more information call Peel Health at 905-799-7700**

**or visit**

**[peelsexualhealth.ca](http://peelsexualhealth.ca)**

**[peelregion.ca/health](http://peelregion.ca/health)**

**[intheknowpeel.ca](http://intheknowpeel.ca)**