



## **Genital HPV Infection**

**What is genital HPV infection?** Human papilloma virus (HPV) is a common skin virus with over 200 subtypes currently identified. Thirty of these subtypes can cause genital HPV. These are sexually transmitted and fall almost equally into low-risk and high-risk categories. Low-risk genital HPV infection may cause condyloma or genital warts, which appear as small warts or growths anywhere in the genital area in both men and women. High-risk HPV (HR HPV) often produces no symptoms and may be associated with abnormal Pap smears in women. HR HPV has been identified as a cause of cancer in genital and anal skin of both women and men.

**How common is genital HPV?** HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the U.S. One of every 2-3 young sexually active people carries at least one of the genital HPV types. By age 60, 80% of sexually active people have been exposed to genital HPV at some point in their lives. Most people who have genital HPV do not know they are infected.

**How did I get HPV?** The HPV virus is transmitted by sexual activities with a partner with an active infection. The partner may have no symptoms, especially with HR HPV. Although intercourse is the most frequent type of transmission, HPV can also be transmitted with fingers, sex toys, anal sex, and oral sex. As the virus can live anywhere in the genital skin, condoms protect against HPV in only 85% of cases. Because this virus grows very slowly, symptoms may not appear for many months after exposure.

**How is genital HPV treated?** Condyloma or genital warts are usually treated with topical chemical medications (trichloroacetic acid or podophyllin) or freezing. In severe cases, laser or surgical treatment may be necessary. While these treatments can destroy visible warts, the wart virus can remain in nearby normal-looking tissue after treatment. You may feel frustrated or depressed when new warts appear, but repeat treatments on a weekly basis often solves the problem. This virus can produce new warts, sometimes weeks or even months after the old ones have been destroyed. The average genital HPV infection lasts eight months with a range of three months to several years. Over time, an immune response will eventually occur and eliminate the active infection.

Abnormal Pap smears may require colposcopy (visual examination with a special lighted instrument) and treatment with freezing or minor surgery to the cervix (called LEEP). It is very important for women with a history of genital HPV to have regular Pap smears to screen for precancerous changes which can occur years later in some cases.

**Can genital HPV infection be prevented?** The fewer sexual partners a person has the lower the risk of exposure to genital HPV. The risk is much lower in long-term, mutually monogamous relationships. Condoms are 85% effective against HPV and have a valuable role in prevention. A vaccine is now available for women to prevent four of the main types of genital HPV. It requires three doses (0, 2, and 6 months) and is most effective if started before initiation of first sexual activity. It is not effective in treating an HPV infection which is already present.

**What about my partner?** If you are diagnosed with genital HPV, your partner should be examined by a clinician experienced in this problem. HPV lesions are often very small and difficult to diagnose by self-exam. Treatment of both partners and strict use of condoms until resolution of all symptoms has been shown to speed recovery from this infection.

**Can I get genital HPV again?** Since there are 30 subtypes of genital HPV, a person can get this infection again if they are exposed to a different subtype by a new partner. For this reason, we recommend that women 26 or younger receive the HPV vaccine even if they have a current or prior HPV infection.

**If I have genital HPV, will I get cancer?** Although HR HPV is known to cause cancer of the genital skin, the vast majority of young people who get this infection will never develop cancer. The most common HPV cancer is cancer of the cervix, and regular Pap smears will detect this in the precancerous stage in almost all women.

**Where can I get more information about genital HPV?** Some excellent sources of information about genital HPV infection include the following:

[www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com)

[www.cdc.gov/std](http://www.cdc.gov/std)

[www.ashastd.org](http://www.ashastd.org)

[www.acog.org/publications/patient\\_education/bp073.cfm](http://www.acog.org/publications/patient_education/bp073.cfm)