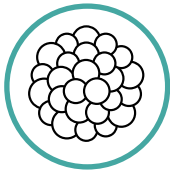


Human Papillomavirus (HPV)



What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is a virus that can transmit from one person to another during intimate contact. This virus affects several organs, including genital area, anal area and oral cavity. Infection with HPV is very common around the world. It is estimated that without immunization, three out of four sexually active Canadians will get HPV in their lifetime. There are many different types of HPV. Most people with HPV infection are asymptomatic. However, some types of HPV can cause genital warts and cancers, such as cervical or penile cancer. Fortunately, infections from most common cancer-causing types of HPV can be prevented with the HPV vaccine.

Is it serious?

There is no cure for HPV infection. However, in most cases (9 out of 10), HPV goes away on its own within two years without leading to known health problems. But when HPV persists in the body, it can cause health problems like genital warts and cancer, depending on the type of HPV virus.

It is estimated that
without immunization

3 out of 4

sexually active Canadians
will be infected with HPV
at some point in their lives

Prevention

You can protect yourself against HPV with a safe and effective vaccine. The vaccine has been shown to prevent approximately 70% of cervical cancers and 60% of high-risk precancerous cervical lesions, as well as 90% of genital warts when you receive a complete series. The vaccine is given to children in Grade 7 as two separate shots six months apart, as well as to individuals who meet certain high-risk criteria.



HPV can cause cervical, genital and anal cancers. It can also lead to certain cancers of the head and neck. Cancer often takes years, even decades, to develop after a person gets HPV. Individuals who get routine Pap tests, starting at age 21, can prevent cervical cancer or catch it at very early stages when it may be curable.

HPV can also cause genital warts which usually appear as a small bump or group of bumps in the genital area that may be painless or can cause mild pain, discomfort and itching. They can be small or large, raised or flat, or shaped like a cauliflower.

Genital warts can usually be diagnosed by looking at the genital area and treated by a health care provider. However, if left untreated, genital warts may go away, stay the same, or grow in size or number.

There is no way to know who will develop cancer or other health problems from HPV.

How is HPV spread?

HPV can spread through close skin-to-skin touching during various types of sexual activities. A person with HPV can pass the infection to someone even when they have no signs or symptoms. This makes it difficult to know exactly when or how the virus was spread.

HPV is not spread by casual contact, such as hugging, shaking hands, sneezing or coughing. HPV is also not spread through air, food or water.



Symptoms

Most people never develop symptoms and do not know they have HPV. Some people find out they have HPV when they develop genital warts. Some may find out they have HPV when they get an abnormal Pap test result (during routine cervical cancer screening). Others may only find out once they've developed more serious problems from HPV, such as cancer.

Visit ontario.ca/hpv to learn more.

Stay up to date with your vaccinations

Vaccination is the best way to protect against HPV. Publicly funded HPV vaccines are provided to specific populations, including school-age students, as well as people that meet certain high-risk criteria.

HPV vaccination is recommended before becoming sexually active and being exposed to HPV, to maximize the benefit of the vaccine.



What are the risks?

Unimmunized people who have engaged in various types of sexual activities, including but not limited to genital skin-to-skin contact and oral sex, are at high risk for HPV infection. HPV is very common. In fact, it's more common than all other sexually transmitted infections combined. Condoms or other barriers can reduce HPV infection if used before skin-to-skin sexual contact. However, areas not covered by these barriers still allow some skin-to-skin contact creating potential for HPV infection to spread. Therefore, using barriers will reduce – but not eliminate – the risk of HPV infection.

It takes all of us to protect each of us.

Talk to your health care provider or your local public health unit about the HPV vaccine.