

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can affect the penis, vagina, anus, and throat.

Most HPV infections resolve naturally over time without symptoms or health problems. Some types of HPV cause genital warts. Other types of HPV can cause cancer of the cervix, anus, vagina, penis, genital area, and throat.

This page has information only about HPV strains that may cause cancer. These are known as “high-risk HPV types”.

Causes

HPV is a very common virus that most people will get at some point in their life, often without knowing it. It is passed through vaginal, oral, and anal sexual contact. This includes both penetrative sex and sexual activities where there is skin-to-skin contact. You can also get HPV by sharing sex toys.

Symptoms

Most HPV infections do not have symptoms. High-risk HPV type infections can lead to changes to infected cells in the body. If these changes aren't found or treated, they can turn into pre-cancer or cancer over time, causing symptoms like unusual bleeding, lumps, or pain.

Tests and Diagnosis

Testing for high-risk HPV types is available through the [BC Cervix Screening Program](#). You will be asked to swab the inside of your vagina to collect a sample for laboratory testing. This is called cervix self-screening or HPV self-screening.

If you do not want to self-screen, there are other options available. Talk to a healthcare provider to discuss cervix screening options and when to screen.

Depending on your HPV self-screening results, a [Pap test](#) or other exam may be needed.

Regular screening is recommended for people who have a cervix, including women and Two-Spirit, transgender and gender-diverse people with a cervix. Cervix screening is important because it can show if you're at risk of cell changes that could lead to cancer. It can also find and treat these changes early, before they become a serious problem.

HPV testing outside of the BC Cervix Screening program is usually not available.

If you have receptive anal sex or are living with HIV, some health professionals may recommend that you have regular [anal screening](#). Talk to your health care provider to figure out what's best for you.

Treatment

Most HPV infections go away on their own and do not need treatment.

If you have an abnormal result from an HPV screening test or Pap test, you may need to test more often or go for additional testing. The sooner these changes are found, the easier they are to treat and the less chance they have of turning into cancer.

Sexual Partners

It is up to you whether or not you tell your sexual partners about having HPV. It can be hard to know when and from who someone got an HPV infection.

HPV is very common, most infections go away, and symptoms or complications can take many years to show up if they do. Partners who have a cervix should follow the regular [HPV cervix screening recommendations](#).

Complications

Most HPV infections do not cause any health problems. Some can cause changes in your cells that can lead to cancer. These changes happen slowly, so it takes many years for a high-risk HPV type infection to develop into cancer, if at all. Of these types of cancers, cervical cancer is the most common.

Prevention

The [HPV vaccine](#) can help prevent most cancers and genital warts. This vaccine is available for people of all genders. The vaccine will not help get rid of an existing HPV infection, but it can prevent future infections. If you already have an HPV infection, getting the vaccine can still prevent new infections with different HPV types.

Talking with partners about safer sex makes sure everyone knows what to expect. Condoms are great if they work for you – the correct use of condoms may reduce your chance of getting or passing HPV.

Resources

SmartSexResource - HPV: A Patient's Guide

<https://smartsexresource.com/resources/hpv-a-patients-guide/>

HealthLink BC – Information about HPV and genital warts in multiple languages

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/hpv-genital-warts>

HealthLink BC – Information about the HPV vaccine

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/hpv-vaccines>

BC Cancer - Information about cervix screening

<http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/screening/cervix>

TransCareBC – Gender-affirming sexual and reproductive health information

<http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/care-support/access-care/sexual-hlth>