

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can occur in the penis or external genitals, vagina or internal genitals, anus, and throat. There are over 40 different types of HPV that can cause infections in these areas.

Some types of HPV cause genital warts. Other types of HPV are more serious and may cause cancer of the cervix, anus, vagina/internal genitals, penis/external genitals, genital area, and throat. **This page has information only about HPV strains that may cause cancer.**

HPV can be managed. It is common within British Columbia.

Causes

HPV 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. If you have HPV, you can pass it to others even if you don't have symptoms.

Symptoms

If you have HPV, it is common to not have any symptoms. If you do get symptoms, the type of symptoms will depend on where the infection is located.

Tests and Diagnosis

In British Columbia, an HPV screening swab test is offered as an alternative to the Pap test that screens for cervical cancer. This swab can be self-collected or health care provider-collected. People who have a cervix, including women and TTGD (Two-Spirit, transgender and gender-diverse) should have regular cervical screening done, as recommended by BC Cancer.

Note: A follow-up Pap test or other exam may be needed depending on your results.

If you have receptive anal sex or are living with HIV, some health professionals may recommend that you have regular anal Pap testing. 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 an HPV infection persists, there are different ways that the cancerous changes in the cells can be treated, depending on how severe the changes are.

If you have an abnormal result from an HPV screening test or Pap test, you may need to have these tests more often or go for additional testing. HPV screening tests and Pap tests often find changes early enough that treatment can be given before cancer develops.

Sexual Partners

It is up to you whether or not you tell your sexual partners about HPV. As HPV usually does not have symptoms, it's important that partners who have a cervix follow the regular screening recommendations made by BC Cancer.

Complications

Most types of HPV do not cause any health problems. However, some can cause changes in your cells that can lead to cancer. Of these types of cancers, cervical cancer is the most likely.

Prevention

The HPV vaccine can help prevent most genital 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.

It is a good idea to be tested regularly for STIs, especially if you have new sexual partners or open relationships. 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>

SmartSexResource – If you are worried or have anxiety about HPV and genital warts

<https://smartsexresource.com/topics/worry-and-anxiety>

TransCareBC – Gender-affirming sexual and reproductive health information

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