

HPV:

A Patient's Guide

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Introduction

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a very common virus which has over 100 types, including 40 types that affect the anal and genital regions. In fact, HPV is by far the most common sexually transmitted infection, and can be easily acquired through skin-to-skin contact.

While most HPV types are harmless and go unnoticed, some types of HPV can significantly affect the body if they persist. HPV types are divided into two groups: “low-risk” and “high-risk” types. Some low-risk types can cause warts, while some high-risk types can cause cell changes that may lead to cancer. For the majority of people who do not have any symptoms (like genital warts), the virus will clear the body on its own.

There are now vaccines that protect against the more common HPV types. Without the HPV vaccine, most sexually active people will get one or more types of HPV in their lifetime.

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What is HPV?



Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a very common virus. In fact, it's the most common sexually transmitted infection. There are over 100 types of HPV. About 40 of them can affect the anal and genital region and are sexually transmitted through skin-to-skin contact.

There are now vaccines that protect against the more common HPV types. Without the HPV vaccine, most sexually active people will get one or more types of HPV in their lifetime. For the majority of people, the virus will clear the body on its own without causing symptoms or problems. For those who do get symptoms (like genital warts), most of these will eventually go away.

While most HPV types are harmless and go unnoticed, some types of HPV can affect the body if they persist. HPV types are divided into two groups: "low-risk" and "high-risk" types. Some low-risk types can cause warts, while some high-risk types can cause cell changes that may lead to cancer.

HPV Low-Risk Types

Two low-risk types of HPV, types 6 and 11, cause most genital warts. Genital warts are temporary, harmless bumps on or in the genitals, the anus or surrounding area. Genital warts may appear as one or more flat or raised, skin-coloured or dark bumps, and may look irregular shaped or cauliflower-like. They may be itchy or hardly noticeable at all. Sometimes they can bleed.

Genital warts may appear anytime from a few weeks to many months or years after you come into contact with HPV. They usually go away within two years, although they may come back again. How fast your body clears genital warts depends on your general health and immune system. For example, non-smokers may clear HPV faster than smokers, since cigarette smoking affects your immune system.

Low-risk types of HPV do not cause cancer and are not associated with medical risks. They may be considered a "nuisance" or cosmetic concern to those that have them.

CAN I GET HPV IF I HAVE NEVER HAD SEX OR "GONE ALL THE WAY"?

If your genitals, mouth or anal region have come into contact with someone else's, you can get HPV even if you've never had penetrative sex. HPV is transmitted through skin-to-skin contact, so grinding or rubbing genitals without wearing underwear can transmit the virus.

CAN I GET HPV IF I ALWAYS USE CONDOMS?

Wearing condoms can help to reduce, but not eliminate, the chances of passing HPV from one partner to another.

I HAD GENITAL WARTS BUT GOT THEM REMOVED. DOES THIS MEAN I NO LONGER HAVE HPV?

Removing genital warts is mostly for aesthetic purposes and does not treat HPV. Removing the warts is often successful, but warts may return again in the future. Removal of the warts does not get rid of the HPV virus itself or prevent warts from coming back.

MY PARTNER TOLD ME THEY HAVE GENITAL WARTS. DOES THIS PUT ME AT RISK FOR CANCER?

The types of HPV that cause genital warts are not the same HPV types that can cause various cancers.

WHY DO THEY SAY HPV/WARTS WILL GO AWAY IN 2 YEARS WHEN I'VE HAD THESE WARTS FOR LONGER?

Most – but not all – people will show no sign of genital warts within an average of two years; some will resolve sooner, some will take longer. There is still ongoing research into the reasons behind this. If you have warts that do not go away after two years, talk to your health care provider about a referral to a gynecologist or dermatologist.



HPV High Risk Types

The other HPV types are called “high-risk” types and they can cause complications if the body doesn’t clear them. In these cases, it is possible that HPV can cause changes in cells that become pre-cancerous or lead to cancer.

In most cases, infections with high-risk types go away on their own. If high-risk HPV persists and does not go away on its own, it may cause cell changes. If these changes are not detected and treated, they may cause cancer of the cervix, vagina, vulva, anus, penis, or throat.

It is important to remember that most people who get high-risk types of HPV do not develop cancer. Whatever type they have, most people will resolve their HPV infection within 2 years. Routine cervical screening (Pap testing) is the best way to screen for cervical cancer. Cervical screening ensures that pre-cancerous cells can be found and treated before they become cancer (see the *HPV Testing* section). Research is still learning about other HPV-related cancers, like those of the anus and throat, so there is no widely available screening for other cancers yet.

HPV vaccination is available for protection against most of the types associated with HPV related cancers and genital warts.

WHAT IS A PAP TEST?

The Pap test (also known as cervical cancer screening) is a test that looks for abnormal cells in the cervix before they become cancer. The Pap test checks for cell changes so they can be found and treated before they become cancer. Earlier detection and treatment of cervical cancer leads to better health outcomes. Cervical screening is recommended for all people with a cervix, even if you have no symptoms and/or you have received the HPV vaccine.

WHAT IS HPV SELF-SCREENING?

In BC, HPV self-screening (or cervix self-screening) is an alternative to the Pap test and it is used as the main test for routine, cervical cancer screening. Cervix self-screening uses HPV testing to look for HPV in your vagina. HPV testing does not need a sample from your cervix. It's done by an HPV swab that can be done wherever you feel safe and comfortable, such as in your home or at a health care provider's office (it can be self-collected or health care provider-collected). A follow-up Pap test or other exam may be needed depending on your results.

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

Who gets HPV?

The short answer is that most sexually active people will have an HPV infection at least once in their life if they have not been vaccinated against it *before* they started being sexually active.

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection: you can think of it as the common cold of STIs. If you have ever had any kind of sexual contact in your life, even with just one partner, there is a chance that you have come into contact with HPV.

It is estimated that about 80% of people who have not received the HPV vaccine will get HPV at some point in their life. For most people, the HPV virus will resolve (go away on its own). The rates of HPV are expected to go down as more people are vaccinated against HPV.



Transmission

HPV is passed through skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. This includes any kind of sexual contact with the anal and genital regions, including genitals rubbing together, penetrative sex (vaginal or anal intercourse), oral sex, sharing sex toys, and hands on genitals. HPV may still be present even if there are no visible warts or when the warts are gone.

Since HPV is so common that most people acquire it sooner or later, it is not realistic to avoid it. There is no need to stop having sex even if warts or other signs of HPV are present, or are being treated.

If a person is pregnant, HPV can also be passed from the mother to the baby. However, this does not mean the baby will have any complications related to HPV. There is still not enough known about maternal to fetal transmission of HPV and the level of risk associated with this.

HPV is not passed by common household activities. You can't get HPV from sleeping in the same bed as someone, or by sharing a bathroom. HPV is not transmitted through toilet seats, towels, baths, hot tubs or swimming pools, or from an infected person's blood or other body fluids.

IF HPV GOES AWAY WILL IT COME BACK?

Some people may not have complete resolution of an HPV type. It could be that the type is dormant or “sleeping” in their body, but reawakens at some point. This sometimes happens when the body is under more stress that affects the immune system, such as periods of extreme stress or certain medications like chemotherapy.

It's also possible that a person may resolve the type completely, but then get it again at a future date. It's also very possible that someone could be infected with a different HPV type if they are exposed to it. Having one type of HPV does not mean you won't get other types of HPV if exposed to them. Regardless of the reason, some people can have recurrent HPV.

I HAD HPV BUT GOT THE WARTS REMOVED. WHEN CAN I HAVE SEX AGAIN?

HPV can be passed to another person even when there are no warts present. However, warts are primarily an aesthetic concern, and there is no medical reason to not have sex.

Protection against HPV

Vaccines

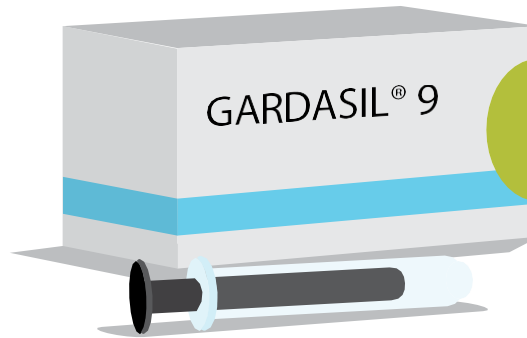
Vaccination is the most effective way to protect yourself against HPV. A decade of using the HPV vaccine in British Columbia, Canada, has shown that it is both safe and effective. For more information about the HPV vaccine, visit www.immunizebc.ca/hpv

In BC, the HPV vaccine currently available is Gardasil 9. Gardasil 9 is widely available, protects against nine strains of HPV, and is appropriate for use in all people. While vaccination does not protect against all types of HPV, it gives excellent protection against most of the strains that lead to cancers and genital warts.

The HPV vaccine is most effective when it's given at a younger age, before any sexual contact,

DID YOU KNOW?

Gardasil 9 protects against the 9 types of HPV that cause 90% of cervical cancers and 90% of genital warts. This includes: cervical, vulvar and vaginal cancers caused by HPV types 16, 18, 31, 33, 45, 52 and 58; genital warts; precancerous anal and genital lesions caused by HPV types 6 and 11; and anal cancers caused by HPV types 16, 18, 31, 33, 45, 52 and 58.



which is why it is offered as a routine vaccination to school-age children. The HPV vaccine is the only vaccine that protects against genital cancers. The HPV vaccine is given as a 2-dose series to people under the age of 15 (this is the optimal age for immune response), and as a 3-dose series for people age 15 and older.

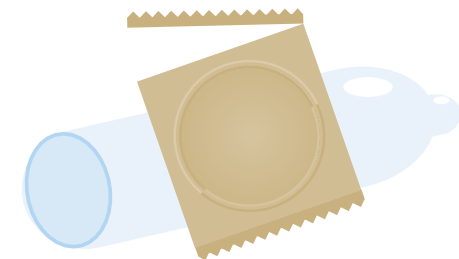
If you did not get the vaccination in school, you can still get it later in life. Gardasil 9 is recommended for anyone with a cervix up to age 45, people without cervixes up to age 26, men who have sex with men of all ages, and people living with HIV age 27 and older. However, even if you fall outside of those age or gender ranges, some experts may still recommend the vaccine if you're sexually active or have had treatment for cervical or anal pre-cancer. Since having HPV once does not make you immune to getting it again, it may still be beneficial to get the vaccine even if you

had HPV in the past. Talk to your health care provider about whether the vaccine is a good choice for you.

If you are eligible for the free Gardasil 9 vaccine, you can get it through your local public health clinic, community health centre or STI clinic. If you are not eligible for the free vaccine, you can self-pay for the vaccination. Extended health benefits or insurance companies may also cover the cost (you may need a doctor's prescription for the insurance company to accept the claim). You can get the for-pay vaccination through your health care provider, a pharmacy, or a travel clinic.

Barrier methods

Condoms and other barrier methods can reduce the possibility of HPV transmission, although they do not provide full protection as HPV can be passed through other skin-to-skin contact. Condoms also protect against other STIs, including gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis and HIV. Using condoms is a good way to reduce the risk of getting STIs.



WHO GETS THE HPV GARDASIL 9 VACCINE FOR FREE IN BC? (AS OF 2019)

- Children of all genders in grade 6
- Individuals who did not start a vaccine series in Grade 6 are eligible to start a series before age 19 (born in 2006 or later) but not after they turn 19.
- People living with HIV, 9-26 years of age
- Transgendered individuals, 9-26 years of age
- Men 9-26 years of age who:
 - have sex with other men
 - are not yet sexually active but are questioning their sexual orientation
 - are street involved
- Boys 9-18 years of age in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD)
- Boys and men in youth custody services centres

I MISSED A DOSE OF VACCINE, DO I NEED TO START THE SERIES OVER AGAIN?

No, you do not need to start the series over again. It's fine to pick up where you left off in the series of shots.

I ALREADY HAVE HPV. WILL THE VACCINE CURE IT?

The HPV vaccine will not cure an existing type of HPV. However, you will get protection from other types of HPV covered by the vaccine. Unlike other STIs, there is no cure for HPV, but there are therapies that can address the effects of HPV in various parts of the body.

IF I GOT AN EARLIER TYPE OF HPV VACCINE, SUCH AS CERVARIX OR GARDASIL 4, SHOULD I GET GARDASIL 9?

This is a personal decision for you to make based on discussion with your health care provider. Gardasil 4 protects you against the 4 strains of HPV most likely to cause cervical cancer and genital warts, while Gardasil 9 protects you against 5 additional strains. Public funding will not cover Gardasil 9 vaccination if you already have Gardasil 4 vaccination, so you would need to pay for the additional vaccine.

If you have started your Gardasil 4 vaccine but haven't yet completed it, you can finish with Gardasil 9. For example, if you got one Gardasil 4 shot you could get two Gardasil 9 shots. This should be enough to cover you for HPV types 6, 11, 16 and 18. However, it

may not cover you for types 31, 33, 45, 52 and 58, because you would only have 2 out of 3 doses.

I MISSED GETTING THE HPV VACCINE IN SCHOOL. WHERE CAN I GET IT FOR FREE NOW?

Not everyone is eligible to receive the HPV vaccine for free. You can see if you have access to the free HPV vaccine through your local health unit (also called public health units, community health centres and primary care homes). Some STI clinics may also carry the vaccine.

BOOST YOUR IMMUNITY THROUGH HEALTHY LIVING STRATEGIES

There are many practical things you can do to promote a healthy immune system including:

- Get adequate sleep
- Eat a healthy diet with plenty of fruits, vegetables and micronutrients
- Exercise regularly
- Reduce or quit smoking
- If you drink alcohol, use in moderation
- Minimize stress or use healthy stress management

HPV Testing

Specific testing for low-risk types of HPV is not done in BC. Since most low risk infections are short-lived and resolve by themselves, often without symptoms, testing is not considered useful.

Physical exam for genital warts

There is no specific test for genital warts. If you have lumps or bumps on your genitals that you are concerned about, your health care provider can do a physical exam to look for signs of genital warts, other STIs or skin conditions. This exam can be done during routine STI testing.

Routine cervical cancer screening (Pap test)

Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable types of cancer. It happens when a long-term, persistent infection with a high-risk HPV type causes changes to cells on the cervix.

Cervix screening (Pap testing & HPV self-screening) is used to watch for these cell changes. This test looks for abnormal cells on the cervix before they become cancer and monitors for change over time. Because these changes happen very slowly, Cervix screening is recommended every 5 years, starting at age 25.

If you have a cervix, are 25-69 years of age, and have had any kind of sexual contact in your life, including oral or manual sex (any touching of genitals with hands), the BC screening program recommends cervix screening by a health care provider. For more information on cervix screening, visit www.bccancer.bc.ca/screening/cervix

Abnormal cervix screening results

Abnormal cervix screening results are very common and they do not mean you have cervical cancer.

An abnormal HPV self-screening result means that HPV strains were found that were either "high risk" or "low risk" types. An abnormal Pap test means there are some cells on the cervix that do not look normal and need to be checked more closely.

You may be referred for additional tests such as a follow-up Pap test, or a colposcopy, which allows for a closer look at the cervix and, if needed, to take a small sample for further examination.

Abnormal cervical cells may resolve on their own or the health care provider may recommend a special treatment such as a LEEP (Loop Electrosurgical Excision Procedure) to remove the abnormal cells. It is very important to attend follow-up appointments as recommended by your provider to have the best outcome.

I HAD AN ABNORMAL CERVIX SCREENING RESULT (PAP TEST OR HPV SELF-SCREENING). DO I HAVE CANCER?

It is quite common to be told you have had an abnormal Pap or HPV self-screening test and it does not mean that you have cancer. Most cervical cell changes are noticed early on with screening and either resolve on their own or are easily treated before they can become cancerous. If you have an abnormal cervix screening result, you will be given follow-up instructions. It is very important to attend any recommended follow-up appointments.

I HAD AN ABNORMAL CERVIX SCREENING RESULT, WHAT DO I TELL MY PARTNER? SHOULD I STOP HAVING SEX?

From a medical perspective, you do not need to stop having sex or tell your partner. For more information on talking to a partner, see the *Talking To Your Partner About HPV* section.

HPV TYPE - SPECIFIC TESTING

HPV testing for cervix screening is well established globally. HPV testing detects if high-risk HPV is present and identifies people at risk for cervical cancer, even before changes to the cells of the cervix can occur.

In BC, a vaginal swab that tests for HPV is the current standard for cervical screening in BC. It's an alternative to the Pap test and does not require a sample from the cervix. It's a swab that looks for HPV in the vagina. It is also known as cervical self-screening because it's a very effective screening test for cervical cancer and the swab can be self-collected or health care provider-collected. It does not require a speculum exam and is easy and painless: you use a small, Q-tip like swab to collect a sample from the vagina. A follow-up Pap test or other exam may be needed depending on your results.

Anal cancer screening

Though rare, anal cancer is another HPV-related cancer that is preventable. If you have receptive anal sex, you may want to talk to your health care provider about STI testing and anal cancer screening. In some populations, such as people living with HIV or women with a history of cervical cancer, anal Pap testing may be recommended as the risk of anal cancer is higher than average. Similar to a cervical pap test, an anal Pap looks for abnormal cells in the anus before they can become cancerous.

At this time, research does not indicate that anal Pap testing is recommended for the general population due to the fact that HPV is so common, most HPV infections resolve without any treatment or complications, and anal cancer is relatively rare in the general population.

Oral cancer screening

HPV can sometimes lead to oral and throat cancers. Oral and throat cancers are relatively rare in the general population. You may be at higher risk for oral and throat cancers if you smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol.

Most dentists do a visual screen for oral cancer as part of your routine dental check-up. If you have concerns about unusual mouth sores or lumps that do not heal, see your dentist or health care provider. HPV testing for oral or throat cancers is not available.



If you have HPV

Treating genital warts

Genital warts may be treated for aesthetic reasons to remove the bumps. Many people choose not to treat genital warts and instead wait for the body to clear the virus naturally. Treatment can remove the visible warts so they can't be seen anymore, but won't cure HPV or make you immune to HPV. It is possible that the warts may return.

Treatment can be done by a health care provider or at some clinics. Treatment for genital warts may include cryotherapy (freezing with liquid nitrogen) or applying medicated liquids, creams or gels directly to the skin. If warts don't respond to regular treatment, you may be referred to a specialist who specializes in the treatment of genital warts. Other treatments used by specialists include laser therapy and electrocautery.

Working through your diagnosis

While HPV is very common, generally goes away on its own and does not usually cause complications, people can have a range of feelings when they first learn they have it. Some people, especially those who already have some knowledge of HPV, are not bothered by it. Other people may feel upset

and overwhelmed. Many people experience feelings somewhere in between.

There is a lot of misinformation and stigma about STIs, including HPV. It's normal to have questions and concerns. Get information to educate yourself, practice good self-care, and return to life as normal, which includes having a sex life. All of this will help you feel balanced and keep perspective about this very common and manageable STI.

Ongoing challenges

Some people may feel stuck in their feelings and have trouble moving forward. If the feelings are overwhelming, going on for months, or are affecting your ability to function, think about connecting with some outside support. You may find it helpful to talk to a health care professional or counsellor, for a safe, confidential space to work through your feelings.

Talking to partners about HPV

HPV is a very common virus and most people who are sexually active will eventually be exposed to it. In fact, it's useful in your sexual decision-making to assume that you and your partners will get HPV at some point, or have had it already. It is unrealistic to assume that it is possible to avoid HPV.

Whether you or your partner have been diagnosed with HPV, it's important to not blame or shame. There's no way to know for sure when HPV was passed, or by whom.

WHY IS HPV NOT A REPORTABLE INFECTION LIKE GONORRHEA OR CHLAMYDIA?

Some STIs such as chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis are reported to public health to help make sure that any partners who need testing and antibiotic treatment are notified. HPV doesn't require antibiotics and is not a reportable infection.

DO I HAVE TO TELL MY PARTNERS?

It is always your choice whether or not to talk to your partners about HPV. HPV is so common that we know most people come into contact with it, it usually goes away on its own, and there are tests such as cervical screening that can monitor for possible complications due to HPV. The health care system has good measures in place to take care of everyone, even if they're not vaccinated. This means there is no medical need to tell your partners.

Resources

SMART SEX RESOURCE



<https://smartsexresource.com/topics/human-papillomavirus-hpv>



<https://smartsexresource.com/topics/genital-warts>

SEXUAL HEALTH CLINIC FINDER:



<https://smartsexresource.com/get-tested/clinic-finder>

BC OPTIONS FOR SEXUAL HEALTH

Ask questions through the website and get an email response.



<https://www.optionsforsexualhealth.org/>

SEX SENSE PHONE LINE

Free, confidential sexual health referral and information service from Options for Sexual Health.

Open Monday to Friday 9 AM – 9 PM, PST



1-800-739-7367 anywhere in B.C.



604-731-7803 in the Lower Mainland

HPV INFO

This information site is maintained by the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada



hpvinfo.ca

IMMUNIZE BC



<https://immunizebc.ca/vaccines/hpv>

BC CANCER

CERVIX SCREENING:



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

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT HPV:



<http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/screening/cervix/how-it-works/what-is-cervix-self-screening>

