



Think about it.

Talk about it.

Understanding means peace of mind and cancer prevention.

The presence of Human Papillomavirus (HPV) in anyone who has ever had sex is normal. Most people carry the virus at some time in their lives, sometimes for a few months or a year or two. There are many types of HPV, and most of them are harmless. There are a few types that can turn into cervical, anal, and oral cancers. However, even these types are very common, and they have to be present for many years before they turn into cancer.

Currently, there is no treatment for HPV. However, there are treatments for the diseases caused by HPV, such as genital warts and precancerous cells on the cervix. Most of the time, a person can carry HPV and have no genital warts or precancerous cells on the cervix. In this case, the body will usually heal itself.

Every person reacts to HPV differently. Most people with HPV have no symp-

toms and will not develop any problems from the infection. Others may develop genital warts. Often, a person will even have more than one type of HPV. Typically, within 12 months after infection occurs, the virus is no longer detectable, so many people have HPV without knowing about it.

How is HPV transmitted?

HPV is spread by skin-to-skin contact, usually during sex. It is usually passed between two people during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. HPV is also present under people's finger nails and in people's mouths, so it can sometimes be spread by intimate contact without intercourse.

HPV is spread easily during sex, even if you use condoms, and even if no genital warts are present. The virus lives in the skin of infected people in areas like the mouth, fingers, penis, scrotum, and vagina. People who chose to have sex will have HPV. This is normal. For almost everyone, HPV goes away on its own and is harmless.

Condoms do not offer much protection against HPV because the virus can often be in areas that the condom doesn't cover. Still, it is a good idea to use them because there are STDs that condoms do prevent, such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, HIV, and hepatitis B and C. The only sure way to protect yourself from HPV is to not have sex.

How do I know if I have HPV?

The two main ways to know if you have HPV are: if genital warts appear or (if you are female) you take an HPV test and the results come back abnormal. Most women over 30 have an HPV test done along with their Pap test, as part of their routine screening for cervical cancer. Positive HPV tests are so common for women under 30 that they aren't recommended.

If a woman has an abnormal Pap test, follow-up testing may be needed to determine if HPV is the cause.

How can I protect myself from HPV?

Since HPV is so common and so easy to transmit, most sexually active people will carry the HPV virus at some point in their lives. In most people, these infections will not cause any serious problems and often clear on their own.

Both men and women should do self-exams for warts and unusual bumps around the vagina and anus. If you are a female, the best thing you can do to protect yourself is to have regular Pap tests and get the HPV vaccine before you have sex.

Should I get the HPV vaccine?

In 2006 the FDA approved an HPV vaccine for females ages 9-26. The vaccine protects against the types of HPV that may cause precancerous changes in the cervix and some kinds of genital warts. The vaccine, given in 3 doses, works best when it's given to girls before they are sexually active (usually ages 9-12). The HPV vaccine does not help at all if you already carry the virus. Because of this, girls or young women, ages 13-18, may want to consider getting the vaccine. If you are older than 18, talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner to see if the vaccine is right for you.

The HPV vaccine does not protect against pregnancy, other STDs, or HIV. Practice safer sex by using latex or polyurethane condoms and talking with your partner about your sexual history and your concerns.

It's still important to have regular Pap tests even if you have had the vaccine. Pap tests should be done every 3 years, starting at age 21.

What are genital warts?

Some types of HPV can cause genital warts. Genital warts can appear inside the vagina, on the lips around the vagina, on the penis or scrotum, around the anus, or occasionally on the belly or thighs. They usually look like cauliflower-like bumps, or flat pink, red or skin-colored patches. The affected area can itch, or feel irritated, but sometimes the warts do not cause any discomfort at all. Often, an outbreak of genital warts may occur when the immune system is weakened. People who may have a weakened immune system include those who are taking chemotherapy or steroids or have an untreated HIV infection.

If a person has HPV, it may take several months or even years for the warts to appear. Your doctor or nurse practitioner can usually identify warts during an office visit.

What is the treatment for genital warts?

Although there is no cure for HPV, there are different treatments for genital warts. Your doctor or nurse practitioner may recommend putting medication on the warts or other treatments. It often takes several visits to completely remove the warts. Once the warts are gone, the virus may still be present. Sometimes genital warts clear up without treatment after a few months. However, they can sometimes grow and spread through the genital area. If you think you have genital warts, talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner.

How is HPV linked to cancer?

Some types of HPV can cause precancerous changes to the cervix in women, as well as anal and oral cancer in women and men. Most people with HPV will not get cancer.

For women, the most important thing you can do to protect yourself from cervical cancer is to get regular Pap tests, and if you are age 30 or older, regular Pap and HPV tests. Pap tests and HPV tests can detect precancerous cells on the cervix. If results reveal abnormal cells then follow-up tests are needed. You should get a regular Pap test even if you've had the HPV vaccine.

Smoking doubles the risk of cervical cancer in women who have HPV. If you are a smoker and would like to quit, talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner or call your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Department for more information.

Both men and women who have anal sex should be aware of the symptoms of anal HPV infection. These may include bleeding from the rectum during bowel movements or during anal sex, unusual bumps around the anus, or new pain during anal sex. If you have any of these symptoms, or if you have had anal warts in the past, talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner.

What about HPV and pregnancy?

HPV does not affect a woman's ability to get pregnant and is rarely a concern during pregnancy. In some women who have HPV, pregnancy may cause an outbreak of genital warts. Pregnancy can also cause warts to grow larger than usual.

What should I tell my partner if I have been told that I have HPV?

HPV can be a difficult topic to discuss with a partner because, aside from not having sex, there is no way to prevent HPV transmission. If you chose to tell your partner you have

HPV, you may want to let him or her know that this is a very common virus that many sexually active people carry, and that, in most people, it does not cause serious problems. You may also want to tell them that if they have ever had sex with anyone else, they have been exposed to HPV before this, and that HPV exposure is a normal part of having sex. Remember: it is important to use condoms to prevent the transmission of other STDs. You may also want to ask your doctor or nurse practitioner about being tested for other STDs.

What if I'm under 18?

If you are 12 years old or older, you can be seen, evaluated, and treated for STDs (and other sexual health concerns), without a parent's permission. California State law requires that Kaiser Permanente must protect your privacy.

Additional resources

- National HPV and Cervical Cancer Prevention Resource Center ashstd.org/hpvccrc
- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- Your ability to make the best decisions for your sexual health can be seriously affected by violence or abuse. If you are hit, hurt or threatened by a partner or spouse, there is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to ndvh.org

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.