



Human Papillomavirus (HPV)



Overview

This is the name we give a large group of viruses that often spread by sexual activity. HPV infections are so common that almost everyone will get one soon after they become sexually active. Most infections aren't harmful and go away on their own. But some can lead to cancer.

Causes

How do you get infected? HPV spreads from person to person. Many forms of HPV spread through vaginal, anal, or oral sex. But you don't always have to have sex to be exposed. HPV can also spread through intimate skin-to-skin contact.

Symptoms

What are the symptoms? Well, often there aren't any. You can have an infection and not know it. But some forms of HPV cause warts on intimate places, like your genitals or anus. These warts may go away over time, with or without treatment. But if we don't treat them, they may grow larger and form clusters. And even when you get rid of warts, the virus that caused them may still be in your body.

Cancer risk

Some forms of HPV result in long-lasting infections that harm your cells. This can cause various forms of cancer. HPV is the main cause of cervical cancer in women. But HPV can also cause cancer in the genitals, anus, mouth and throat of males and females.

Prevention and treatment

How can you protect yourself? You can get the HPV vaccine. It's recommended for people under age 26. Ideally, you get it before you become sexually active. Then, when you have sex, always use an appropriate barrier. That could be a condom or a dental dam. If you see warts, tell your doctor so they can be treated. You may also need to be screened for cancer. Your doctor will create a plan that's right for you.

