

Genital Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Infections Genital Warts

What is HPV?

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STI). Up to 70 percent of people will have at least one HPV infection in their lifetime. There are more than 130 different strains (types) of HPV, 40 of which can be transmitted to the genital area. HPV types are classified as high risk (which can cause cervical and other cancers) or low risk (which can cause genital warts).

How do you get HPV?

HPV is spread by skin-to-skin contact with an infected person. This means that you do not need to have penetrative sex (sex where the penis is inserted into the mouth, vagina, or anus) to get it. Any contact in the genital area or skin around the genitals can potentially transmit HPV.

How would I know if I have genital warts?

If a person is infected with a low risk HPV strain that causes genital warts, they might see one or more skin coloured bumps that can vary in size and shape. Genital warts are typically described as "cauliflower-like." In men, genital warts are often found in or around the anus and penis. Women may have genital warts on the cervix, vagina, vulva, or anus. Sometimes genital warts will cause itching or bleeding.

Can genital warts be treated or cured?

There are effective treatments. Genital warts can be treated with either self or doctor applied treatments. The self-applied treatments (such as Imiquimod cream or Podofilox solution) are prescribed by a doctor and can be put on at home. The most common treatment used by a health care provider is called liquid nitrogen. The genital area is very sensitive and so a doctor or nurse must apply the treatment to avoid any damage to the area.

Individuals with genital warts may have recurrences and may require multiple treatments however; most HPV infections will eventually resolve and clear.

What are the risks of not receiving treatment for genital warts?

The majority of HPV infections clear up on their own. However, for some people if HPV infections are left untreated, the warts may continue to grow and spread. Treatment can also reduce the number of recurrences that someone might have. It is very important that people with genital warts abstain from any sexual activity until the lesions are gone to prevent spreading the infection to partners.

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What can I do to prevent genital warts?

- Always use a latex condom when you have oral, anal and vaginal intercourse. Although condoms do not cover the entire area of skin around the genitals, they are the best form of prevention.
- Limit the number of sexual partners that you have.
- Consider getting vaccinated against HPV. The HPV Gardasil vaccine protects against four common strains of the virus, two which lead to most cases of cervical cancer and two which lead to most cases of genital warts. In Canada, Gardasil has been approved for females and males between the ages of 9 and 26 years of age.

If you have any questions, call KFL&A Public Health at 613-549-1232 or 1-800-267-7875, ext. 1275.