

HPV & Genital Warts

What is HPV?

Genital human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus that most sexually active people have at some point in their lives. There are more than 40 types of genital HPV that can infect the skin in, on, and around the genitals and anus—in addition to the mouth and throat. Some types of HPV can cause genital warts.

How common is it?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI). It's estimated that 79 million Americans have HPV.

How do you get it?

HPV is spread by skin-to-skin contact during sex.

How is it diagnosed?

Currently, there is no test to check for your overall “HPV status.” The only approved tests available are for screening people with a cervix for cervical cancer. Oftentimes, HPV infection goes away on its own without causing symptoms. If you have genital warts, you may be diagnosed with HPV based on a clinical exam.

What are the symptoms?

Most people who get HPV never experience any symptoms.

Sometimes, HPV can cause genital warts. The warts are growths that appear on the skin of your penis, testicles, groin, vulva, vagina, front hole, cervix, or anus. The warts may be single, grouped, raised, flat, or be cauliflower-shaped. They usually do not hurt, and are not dangerous although they can be annoying. It is possible to treat and remove genital warts.

Some types of HPV can cause cancer of the penis, anus, vulva, throat, and cervix. These types of cancers are rare. The types of HPV that cause genital warts are not the same as the types that can cause cancer.

How is it prevented?

HPV is so common that it is difficult to prevent if you are having sex, even if you always use condoms.

How is it treated?

There is no cure for HPV, but there are ways to treat genital warts. Warts can be treated with medicine, removed with surgery, or frozen off. Warts may come back after they have been treated.

Should my sex partners get treated too?

The HPV type that causes genital warts can be passed on to sex partners, so it's a good idea to let sex partners know if you have warts. You may also want to avoid having sex until the warts are gone.

There is an HPV vaccine for people between the ages of 9 to 45, but it's recommended that people receive the HPV vaccine before becoming sexually active. The vaccine protects against the types that cause 80% of cervical cancers, 90% of genital warts cases, and other types that can lead to cancer.

Special considerations with HIV?

Some research suggests that having HPV can increase your risk of acquiring HIV (in the absence of PrEP, U=U, or other HIV prevention methods).

Sexual health services from San Francisco AIDS Foundation

Get free sexual health services including STI & HIV testing, PrEP, PEP, anal health care, harm reduction supplies, gender-affirming hormones & more.

We can treat genital warts at Magnet, the sexual health clinic at San Francisco AIDS Foundation. We do not test for HPV.

VISIT US

470 Castro Street, San Francisco
(415) 581-1600



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