

HPV article

Ask any college student what is the most common sexually transmitted disease and most will answer Chlamydia or herpes. While, in fact, HPV or human papilloma virus, is the most common sexually transmitted disease, it is easily the least known. HPV is responsible for genital warts and the majority of abnormal PAP smears requiring further testing, and in rare cases, cervical cancer. HPV is so common because so many women and men are asymptomatic and unknowingly pass it on to their partners. Because of the availability of screening in this country, invasive cervical cancer, which can be deadly, is still an uncommon event.

Signs of HPV

HPV infection is often asymptomatic and an exam by a health care provider may be the only way infection is detected. Genital warts are painless "bumps" that may be whitish in appearance. A person may have a few isolated lesions or rare cases they may cluster together and become large and disfiguring. Mild itching may be the only noticeable symptom. Cervical lesions are often not visible to the naked eye, even to a health care professional, and an abnormal PAP smear may be the only evidence of infection. HPV infection can be present without symptoms for years.

HPV Testing

A trained health care professional may often detect HPV lesions, but if the diagnosis is unclear, "bumps," or lesions, may be biopsied which involves sampling a small piece of tissue and sending it to a laboratory for testing. This is a simple office procedure, which can be done under local anesthesia. Normal PAP smears are not tested for the virus, but certain abnormal smears are tested for different subtypes of HPV. There are hundreds of subtypes, but only a small number are considered high-risk, and associated with cervical cancer and DNA technology helps identify these. A person can, however, be infected with more than one subtype.

Preventing HPV Infection

Unfortunately, even safe sex practices cannot totally prevent HPV infection. Condom use and limiting the number of sexual partners can reduce transmission, but cannot totally eliminate the spread of the virus. Most sexually transmitted diseases are transmitted by bodily fluids such as semen or vaginal fluids. With HPV, even “skin-to-skin” contact is enough to transmit the infection, and a person does not have to have visible warts to be infectious. HPV vaccines are being developed and tested, and when available, they will be a major weapon in helping to prevent certain types of HPV infection.

HPV and Cancer

The biggest concern that most people have about HPV infection is cancer. Certain types of HPV are associated with cervical, vaginal, vulvar and anal cancer. In general, these are rare, but being infected with HPV is a risk factor. People with chronic medical problems that affect the immune system, such as diabetes and HIV infection, are particularly vulnerable.

HPV Treatment

There is no cure for HPV, but HPV changes can be treated depending on the site. Vulvar and vaginal warts can be frozen, burned, or excised. There are also topical treatments that work with your own immune system to help eliminate the warts. Cervical HPV changes or dysplasia only need to be treated if they are “high-grade.” They may be treated with laser, cryotherapy (“freezing”), or cone biopsy. A cone biopsy involves removing a portion of the cervix that is affected by the virus. These are quick outpatient procedures. In general, the HPV virus cannot be totally eliminated from affected areas, but it may be controlled. While HPV infection can be scary, early detection is possible and potential complications such as cancer and disfiguring warts can be avoided.