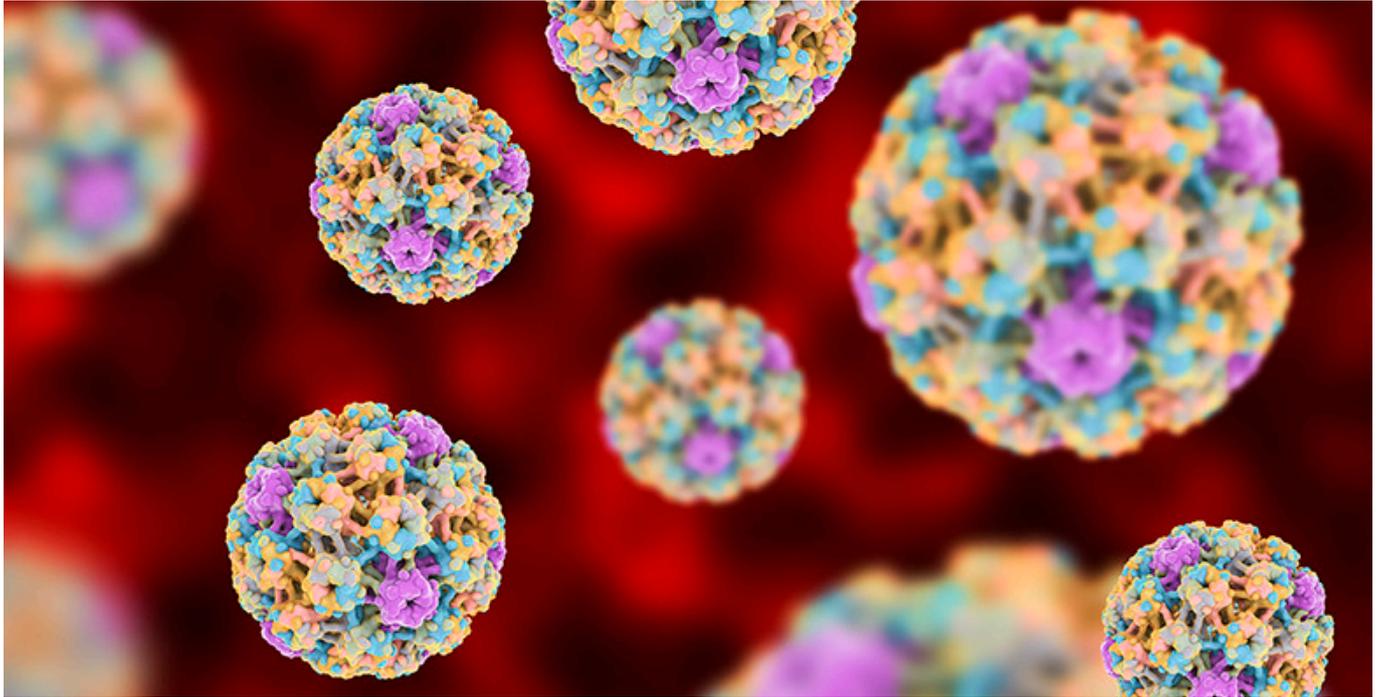


# HPV symptoms & treatment



## FAST FACTS

- Human papilloma virus (HPV) is the name for a group of viruses that affect your skin. Genital HPV infections are those affecting areas around the vagina, penis and anus.
- Genital HPV infections are passed on through genital skin-to-skin contact including sex without a condom, and can be passed from one person to another even if there are no symptoms.
- Symptoms and effects of HPV infections vary. Most strains do not cause any problems but some cause [genital warts](#), while other types can lead to cancer.
- Using [male](#) and [female condoms](#), dental dams and latex gloves can prevent genital HPV infection.
- Having regular cervical screenings (smear tests) where available will help to identify abnormal cells on the cervix caused by HPV, which could lead to cancer.

## What is the human papilloma virus (HPV)?

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is the name for a group of viruses that affect your skin, and the moist membranes of your body, for example, the cervix (entrance to the womb), anus, mouth and throat.

There are a number of different strains of HPV - most have no symptoms, go away by themselves and don't cause any health problems, while other strains can cause cancer.

There are two main genital HPV infections that you should be aware of.

- those that can cause genital warts – small growths around the genitals that usually aren't painful and can be treated each time they appear. They are not cancer and don't cause cancer.
- those that can lead to cervical, anal and other cancers. Most cases of cervical cancer are linked to an infection with certain types of HPV.

## What do HPV symptoms look like?

Not all cases of HPV will have symptoms. Symptoms vary depending on the strain of HPV.

Genital HPV symptoms include:

Genital warts (called low-risk HPV) – read our [genital warts page](#).

Cancer-causing HPV (called high-risk HPV) – in most cases these don't cause any symptoms and you can have HPV for many years without it causing health problems.

As well as cervical cancer HPV can also cause other cancers such as anal cancer, cancer of the penis, vagina, vulva and back of the throat, although these are very rare.

## How do you get HPV?

HPV infections are passed on through skin-to-skin contact – often through a cut, abrasion or small tear in your skin.

Genital HPV infections are very common and are often easily passed on through:

- [vaginal](#), [anal](#) or [oral sex](#) without a condom (or dental dam), with someone who has an HPV infection (even if they don't have symptoms)
- sharing sex toys that aren't washed or covered with a new condom each time they are used
- close genital contact – this means HPV can be passed on even if there's no penetration, orgasm or ejaculation.

## How do you protect yourself from HPV?

- Use a new condom or dental dam every time you have vaginal, anal or oral sex. Remember HPV can affect areas not covered by a condom, so this may not offer full protection.
- Use a new dental dam or latex gloves for rimming and fingering (exploring your partner's anus with your fingers, mouth or tongue) or use latex gloves for fisting.
- Cover sex toys with a new condom for each partner and wash them after use.
- Remember, the virus is not just passed on through penetrative sex and can be transmitted through any genital skin-to-skin contact.

## Get vaccinated

Vaccines are available to prevent certain types of HPV that can cause cancers and warts. These are often offered to adolescent girls, men who have sex with men and people living with HIV. It's best to

have the vaccine before you start having sex, although it's sometimes possible to get the vaccine later in life.

Ask a healthcare worker to find out if you can get the HPV vaccine where you are.

Remember, the vaccine only protects against certain strains of HPV, and does not guarantee that you will not develop genital warts or cancer in the future. So it's important to use condoms and go for cervical screening (smear tests) regularly where available.

## Talk to your partner

It's important that you're able to talk about your sexual health with your partner/s. This way you can let each other know about any symptoms or infections, and discuss how you will have safer sex together.

If you are having sex with multiple partners, it's even more important to use condoms and to have regular STI tests. Remember that condoms are the best form of protection against STIs and pregnancy. Other contraceptives including the contraceptive pill will not prevent HPV, neither will PrEP.

## Can I get tested for HPV?

Different strains of HPV are tested for in different ways.

### Genital warts (low-risk HPV)

A healthcare professional can quickly examine you to tell if you have genital warts.

### Cancer-causing HPV (high-risk HPV)

- For women – genital HPV testing is often a part of cervical screening, which checks for abnormal cells on the cervix (entrance to the womb). Cervical screening isn't a test for cancer – it's a test to check the health of the cells of the cervix. If you have changes in the cells on your cervix, this doesn't mean you have cervical cancer but in some cases the abnormal cells need to be removed so they can't develop into cancer.
- For men – there's currently no reliable test for HPV infection and it's often very difficult to diagnose, as there are no symptoms for high-risk HPV. Some people who are at a high risk of having anal HPV and of developing anal cancer (for example men who have sex with men or people living with HIV) may be offered an anal smear which checks for abnormal cells in the anal canal.

## How is HPV treated?

Cancer-causing HPV (high-risk HPV): if a cervical screening test shows you have abnormal cells on the cervix, it may be necessary to remove them so that they don't develop into cancer.

If cervical cancer does develop and is found early, it's usually possible to treat it using surgery.

Genital warts (low-risk HPV): there's no cure for genital warts, but it's possible for your body to clear

the virus over time. The warts can be removed using creams, freezing or heating. Read our [genital warts page](#) for more information.

### HPV and pregnancy

If you are a pregnant woman with HPV, it can be passed to your baby at birth, but this is rare. Talk to your healthcare worker if you are pregnant and worried about HPV, they will be able to advise you on your options.

### HPV, HIV and sexual health

- Having an STI, including genital warts, can increase your risk of getting [HIV](#). This is because having an STI makes it easier for HIV to get into your body and cause an infection.
- People living with HIV are more likely to get HPV because of their weakened immune system.
- If someone living with HIV also has HPV, their viral load will increase, which will make them more likely to pass on HIV during unprotected sex, even if they are taking HIV drugs (antiretrovirals). However, if they have an [undetectable viral load](#) there is no evidence that HPV makes you more likely to pass on HIV.
- The risk of developing HPV-related cancers is higher in people living with HIV who are not on effective treatment. This is because their immune system is often weaker.
- Being on [HIV treatment \(antiretrovirals\)](#), with an undetectable viral load, and having a higher CD4 cell count (over 200) can reduce the risk of developing HPV-related cancers.
- If you are taking antiretrovirals it is important to discuss with your healthcare professional how treatment for HPV may interact with your HIV drugs.

## HELP US HELP OTHERS

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### Sources:

CDC (2020), 'Human papillomavirus (HPV)'

Mayo Clinic (2020), 'HPV Infection'

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