



The ABC's of HPV

What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a group of more than 100 different viruses, each assigned a different number. Some strains of the virus cause cold sores. Others are sexually transmitted and include the most common sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in the United States.

HPV 16 & 18, both STDs, have been identified as the cause of approximately 70% of all cases of cervical cancer worldwide. More recently, HPV 16 has been strongly linked to a significant and growing number of cases of head & neck cancer.

Some strains of HPV cause genital warts, although the types that cause warts are not associated with increased risk of cancer.

What types of cancer are linked to HPV?

- Cervical cancer
- Head & neck cancers (base of tongue, tonsils, soft palate in throat)
- Cancer of the vulva (the external female genitals) or vagina
- Anal cancer
- Cancer of the penis
- Cancer of the perineum (the area between the genitals and anus)

How do you get HPV?

You can get HPV when you have skin-to-skin contact with an infected person, via the mouth, vagina, vulva, penis, anus, or fingers. The virus thrives in warm, moist mucosal tissues — the kind found in the mouth or vagina.

So you can get HPV even if you don't have sexual intercourse?

Yes. HPV can be spread through skin-to-skin contact with the mouth, vagina, vulva, penis, anus, or fingers of an infected person.

How many people are infected with HPV?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted disease (STD) in the United States. More than 26 million Americans are infected. It is estimated that about 70% of men and women in the United States will acquire the infection at some point during their lives.

What are some of the symptoms of HPV?

As noted, some types of HPV cause warts on the vagina, vulva, penis or anus. *The HPV strains that cause genital warts are not associated with cancer.*

The types of HPV that increase the risk of cancer do not produce warts or any other symptoms.

How is HPV Treated?

There is no cure for HPV, just as there is no cure for the common cold. (Both are viruses.)

In most people, an HPV infection will clear up on its own, but it can be passed on to other people during the infection period — just as with the common cold.

However, in some cases, the person may continue to be infected for decades without any symptoms. During that time, the infected person can infect others without knowing it. This “silent,” chronic HPV infection increases the risk of developing certain cancers.

Can genital warts be treated?

Yes. Approximately 30 types of HPV cause genital warts, which can be removed surgically, by freezing or cauterizing, with lasers, or with medications that are either injected into the warts or applied to the surface.

Removing the warts does not kill the HPV virus, and warts may reappear. The HPV strains that cause genital warts have not been linked to cancer.

What is the HPV vaccine?

The HPV vaccine currently on the market in the U.S. protects against HPV 6, 11, 16 and 18 only.

- HPV 16 & 18 cause about 70% of all cases of cervical cancer.
- HPV 16 is strongly linked to the development of head and neck cancers.
- HPV 6 and 11 cause about 90% of genital warts.

How safe is the vaccine?

Side effects are mild and may include temporary soreness, redness, or sometimes swelling at the injection site.

Who should get the vaccine?

It is recommended for girls and young women, ages 11-26, but can be given to girls as young as 9. Ideally girls should be vaccinated before they become sexually active. The vaccine is given as a series of three shots over a period of six months.

What about boys?

The Food & Drug Administration (FDA) is currently reviewing data to determine whether the HPV vaccine should be cleared for use in boys. A decision is expected in June 2009.

If the FDA approves the use of the vaccine for boys, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) will decide whether the vaccine should be added to the list of recommended immunizations for adolescent boys.

Should I get the vaccine even if I am already infected with HPV?

The vaccine is used to prevent HPV 6, 11, 16 and 18, and few people are infected with all four types. While the vaccine will not protect you against any types with which you are already infected, it will protect against any of the four that you do not already have.

What about insurance coverage?

Here are some questions and answers from the CDC website:

Will the vaccine be covered by insurance plans?

Most insurance plans and managed-care plans cover recommended vaccines. However, there may be a lag time after a vaccine is recommended, before it is available and covered by health plans. While some insurance companies may cover the vaccine, others may not.

How can I get the vaccine if I don't have insurance?

The Vaccines for Children (VFC) program helps families of children who may not otherwise have access to vaccines by providing free vaccines to doctors who serve them. The VFC program provides free vaccines to children and adolescents younger than 19 years of age, who are either Medicaid-eligible, American Indian, or Alaska Native or uninsured. There are over 45,000 sites that provide VFC vaccines, including hospital, private, and public clinics. The VFC Program also allows children and adolescents to get VFC vaccines through Federally Qualified Health Centers or Rural Health Centers, if their private health insurance does not cover vaccinations. For more information about the VFC, visit www.cdc.gov/vaccines/programs/vfc/

Some states also provide free or low-cost vaccines at public health department clinics to people without health insurance coverage for vaccines.

Should I be tested for HPV? Where can I get the test?

For males: Currently there is no HPV test for males.

For females: Routine HPV testing for females is not recommended. However, when abnormal cells are detected on the cervix during a Pap exam (an examination of the cervix), two tests may help identify the problem:

- The HPV high-risk panel, which is used to detect any one of the 14 types of “high risk” HPV that can develop into cervical cancer.
- The new HPV 16/18 test, which is used to detect only HPV 16 or 18, which account for approximately 70% of all cases of cervical cancer. HPV 16 is also strongly associated with head and neck cancer.

How can I protect myself from throat cancers?

1. DO NOT USE TOBACCO IN ANY FORM, INCLUDING CHEWING TOBACCO. IF YOU SMOKE, QUIT.

2. Those eligible should GET THE HPV VACCINE to protect against HPV-related throat cancer.

Ongoing research at Roswell Park focuses in part on identifying additional risk factors that might help identify people at greatest risk for head and neck cancer so they can be referred for specialized screening on a regular basis.

What are the symptoms of throat cancers?

Persistent throat pain, difficulty swallowing, and lumps in the neck which last for more than three weeks may be symptoms of throat cancer. See your doctor if you are experiencing any of them.

What's the prognosis for HPV-linked throat cancers?

If treated properly, the cure rate may be as high as 75%, even for late-stage disease. Cancers of the tonsil and base of tongue and oral pharynx that are HPV-positive tend to respond very well to chemotherapy and radiation.

Research at RPCI aims to determine whether patients with HPV-positive throat cancers would benefit from modified treatment. That information could redefine the standard of care for patients with cancers of the head & neck.