

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is an exceedingly common sexually transmitted infection (STI). It is estimated that, because this virus is transmitted by skin-to-skin genital contact, 80% of sexually active college students will become infected with it before graduation. The good news is that, for most people, infection is without any symptoms or complications, and the body's own immune system clears it within two years (much as your immune system clears a common cold, although with HPV, it takes longer). In a small percentage of people, however, the viral infection persists and can cause problems.

Risks associated with infection

Over 40 different subtypes of HPV (including over 100 strains) infect the human genitalia. These are divided into two main groups, low-risk and high-risk. In this case, "risk" refers to the likelihood that the virus will predispose a person (male or female) to developing pre-cancerous changes within the infected tissues.

Low risk HPV subtypes (6 and 11 are most common) tend to infect the scrotum, penis, anal area, and vulva. If they do cause symptoms, it is typically in the form of genital warts. These warts are fleshy, painless growths that may be small or large, single or multiple. Warts are not dangerous but they can be

annoying (i.e., potentially uncomfortable and/or unsightly).

High-risk HPV subtypes (16 and 18 are most common) tend to infect the cervix and occasionally the anal area. If not cleared by the body's immune system, they can cause pre-cancerous changes of these tissues. Usually the infected person has no symptoms at all, so regular check-ups are important.

Detection

Because most sexually-active people will become infected with at least one strain of HPV at some point and not experience any problems as a result, *routine testing for the presence of HPV is not recommended*. It is, however, important to watch for the rare problems that the HPV can cause (i.e., warts and/or cervical changes).

For women, annual gynecological exams with Pap smears are the best way to detect active infection, as the Pap looks for the changes in the cells that indicate persistent HPV. In fact, regular Pap tests are extremely effective in preventing cervical cancer, for they detect changes early on before the disease can progress.

For men, a clinician can look for the presence of genital warts. Unfortunately, there is *no routinely-recommended screening test for men*, but current studies are evaluating the efficacy of Pap tests of the anal area to look for high-risk HPV in those who engage in receptive anal intercourse.

Remember, most people infected with HPV will have no symptoms and no abnormalities on the Pap tests. Of those who *do* have symptoms or an abnormal test, the vast majority will resolve (heal) on their own within two years.

Treatment

Genital warts can be treated by a variety of methods, including the use of special medications, the application of a prescription cream, or tissue removal. All of these treatments are available at Gannett, and can be discussed with your clinician.

Cervical changes from HPV may require more frequent monitoring with Pap tests and colposcopy. Colposcopy is a way to more thoroughly evaluate the cervix by looking at it through a magnifier and taking small tissue samples for closer analysis. For the rare cases in which treatment is required, the abnormal areas are removed (by cryotherapy or by surgically-removing the affected cells) during a medical appointment.

Prevention

Because HPV is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact of the genitals (typically by friction or rubbing) and not exclusively through penetration, prevention can be challenging. The strains of HPV that infect the genitals do not tend to infect the mouth or hands, so neither oral contact nor mutual masturbation is likely to cause transmission. Condom use can *significantly decrease the likelihood of infection of the cervix or anus*, but it does not fully protect other genital areas (e.g., the labia, scrotum, perineum, etc.) that may experience skin-to-skin contact.

A vaccine that protects against several strains of HPV is currently available. The vaccine is given in a series of shots over several months. Many, but not all, insurance companies will cover the cost of the vaccination for women. (Note: The vaccine is not yet FDA-approved for use in men, but some men at high risk may wish to receive it.) Discuss with your clinician at Gannett whether vaccination might be right for you.

Fall and Spring Semester Hours:

Monday-Friday	8:30 am-5:00 pm
Saturday	10:00 am-4:00pm
Sunday	building closed

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