

What is human papillomavirus?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) infection is a common sexually transmitted disease caused by the human papillomavirus. HPV is the name of a group that includes more than 100 different types of viruses. More than 30 of these viruses are sexually transmitted and can infect the genital area of men and women.

Who is at risk for genital HPV?

Since genital HPV is primarily spread through genital contact, any person engaging in sexual contact with another individual can be infected with HPV. The greater the number of sex partners, the greater the risk of infection.

What are the symptoms of genital HPV?

Most people who are infected with genital HPV do not know they are infected because there are no signs or symptoms. If symptoms do occur, they may include visible genital warts or pre-cancerous changes in the cervix, vulva, vagina, anus or penis. Genital HPV infection rarely results in anal, genital, and oral cancers (back of throat, base of tongue, and tonsils).

How soon do symptoms appear?

The time from exposure to the development of symptoms is unknown but is estimated to range from three months to several years.

How is genital HPV spread?

Genital HPV is spread through genital contact. A pregnant woman can pass HPV to her baby during vaginal delivery, although this is rare.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

It is unknown how long a person is able to spread HPV. Since most HPV infections have no signs or symptoms, most infected people are unaware they are infected, yet they can transmit the virus to a sex partner.

How is HPV diagnosed?

Most women are diagnosed with genital HPV on the basis of an abnormal Pap test. A laboratory test also is available to diagnose genital HPV in women. No HPV tests are available for men.

What is the treatment?

There is no cure for genital HPV infection, although in most people the infection goes away on its own. The treatments provided are directed to the changes in the skin or mucous membranes caused by HPV infection, such as warts and pre-cancerous changes in the cervix.

Does past infection make a person immune?

For most people who become infected with genital HPV, the infection will clear on its own. Once a person has been exposed to a specific type of HPV, they cannot be reinfected with the same type again, but can be infected with other types of the virus.

Should adolescents or others be excluded from school, work or other activities if they have genital HPV?

No. Since genital HPV is transmitted through sexual contact, exclusion is not necessary.

What can be done to prevent genital HPV?

- Three HPV vaccines are currently available. HPV4 (Gardasil-4[®]) vaccine is available for both females and males and protects against four different types of HPV, two of which cause cervical cancer and two that cause genital warts. HPV9 (Gardasil-9[®]) is available for females and males, and protects against nine strains of HPV virus. This vaccine protects against wart and cancer causing strains of virus. The Cervarix[®] vaccine is only indicated in females, and protects against two different types of HPV which can cause cervical cancer. All adolescents should receive three doses of HPV vaccine at 11 to 12 years of age. However, vaccination can begin as young as age nine and as late as age 26.
- The HPV vaccination is given in three doses. The second dose is given two months after the first, and a third dose given four months later. The entire series should be administered over six months.
- The most effective way to reduce the spread of genital HPV is to abstain from any genital contact or to be in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship with an uninfected partner. Latex condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can decrease the risk of genital HPV when the infected areas are covered or protected by the condom. The use of latex condoms has been associated with a decreased risk of genital warts and cervical cancer. Additionally, to reduce the spread of infection, the number of sex partners should be limited.

Additional Information:

Additional information is available at www.ndhealth.gov/disease or by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

Resource:

American Academy of Pediatrics. [Human Papillomaviruses]. In: Kimberlin DW, Brady MT, Jackson MA, Long SS, eds. *Red Book: 2015 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 30th ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2015: 576-583.