

# HPV: A GUIDE FOR MEN

## What is HPV?

HPV is the human papillomavirus. There are many different types of HPV. Some cause warts (you're probably familiar with this), like those found on hands. Others mainly infect genital and anal skin and are sexually transmitted. HPV infections are usually not harmful and typically don't cause symptoms you can see. Most men and women never know they have HPV.

## How do you get HPV?

HPV is spread by skin-to-skin contact. This can happen with genital-to-genital contact and with vaginal and anal sex. It may be possible to transmit HPV through oral sex, although oral HPV infections are less common.

## How common is HPV?

Very! Researchers believe more than 70% of sexually active people have HPV at some point in their lives.

## Is HPV dangerous?

Usually not. Most infections go away without causing harm.

## What can HPV cause in men?

Some types of HPV can cause genital warts, which can appear as fleshy, painless, cauliflower-shaped skin growths. Warts are often small and hard to see, though, and can have different appearances: they might be smooth or rough, or large or small. There might be just one wart, or several. The HPV types that cause warts are known as "low risk"

because they are almost never found with genital or anal cancers.

Other types of HPV, called "high-risk" types, can cause small cell changes of the penis and anus that the naked eye can't see. These changes aren't found very often, though, and penile and anal cancers are very rare.

## How does a man know if he has HPV?

Currently, HPV tests are not approved for use with men outside of medical research studies. The current lack of testing options for males can be very frustrating.

To examine men, healthcare providers sometimes take a very close look at the genital area. Warts can be small and very hard to see, even during a medical exam. Also, sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between a wart and normal bumps or pimples.

If you think you have warts, or have been exposed to HPV, go to a healthcare provider. A healthcare provider will check you more closely and may use a magnifying lens to find small warts.

When someone has HPV or a related condition (like warts or cell changes), it isn't necessary for their partners to see a provider as well, unless they have symptoms. This is because there is no treatment for HPV if there are no symptoms.

## What are symptoms of penile and anal cancers?

Penile cancers often present as lesions or masses on the glans, penis or foreskin. Lesions, which may be flat or elevated, often are reddish in appearance, sometimes irritated or painful, and vary in size and distribution. Symptoms of anal cancer may include bleeding, itching, discharge, or pain with the anus or rectum, masses or bumps in the anus, swollen glands in the groin or anus, or change in stools or bowel movements.

Keep in mind that a number of conditions can also cause symptoms similar to those listed above. If you have concerns, get checked by your healthcare provider.

While still not routinely done, some experts do recommend an annual anal Pap test for men who have sex with men, as they are at greater risk for anal cancer. During an anal Pap test, a swab is inserted into the anus to collect a cell sample. The sample is sent to a lab and studied under a microscope to see if any changes are present.

## HPV in Relationships

When one person in a relationship has HPV, it's likely their partner has the virus too (although this can be difficult to prove). Couples that share HPV are not thought to be at risk of reinfecting one another.

## How long can you have HPV without knowing?

It's not unusual for HPV to be found in long-term, faithful relationships. It can take weeks, months, or even years after a person is exposed to HPV before symptoms develop or the virus is detected. So it's usually difficult, if not impossible, to know the source of the infection. Remember, virtually all sexually active people have one or more HPV infections over their lifetime. It's tough to be a normal, sexually active person and not encounter HPV.

## Prevention is Key

There are two main elements to preventing HPV-related disease:

- *Get vaccinated:* The HPV vaccine can protect against both low-risk and high-risk types of HPV. In fact, HPV vaccination can prevent over 90% of HPV-related cancers. Both males and females should be vaccinated, and vaccination is recommended for boys and girls at age 11-12, with catch-up vaccination up to age 26. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved vaccination for adults between 27 and 45 years of age. Speak to your healthcare provider about whether this is an option for you
- *Use condoms:* Using condoms (correctly) every time you have sex is an effective way to reduce your risk for many types of sexually transmitted infections, including HPV. But be aware—since HPV can be passed on by skin-to-skin contact, it can infect areas not covered by a condom.

### Learn More

Learn more about HPV and other STIs from the American Sexual Health Association, a trusted nonprofit organization that has advocated on behalf of those at risk for STIs for more than a century. Our websites include:

[www.ashasexualhealth.org](http://www.ashasexualhealth.org)

[www.iwannaknow.org](http://www.iwannaknow.org)

[www.quierosaber.org](http://www.quierosaber.org)

[www.nccc-online.org](http://www.nccc-online.org)

