

# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT HPV

## THE BASICS

Human papillomavirus (HPV) affects everyone. Raising awareness of HPV and learning more about how it is passed on, prevented and managed, can help to eliminate the virus and reduce the risk of developing certain cancers.



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## WHAT IS HPV?

HPV is a group of viruses that affect the skin and parts of the body that have moist membrane (mucosa) linings, such as:

**MOUTH AND THROAT**  
**CERVIX**  
**VAGINA AND VULVA**  
**ANUS**  
**SKIN OF THE PENIS**

There are over 200 different types of HPV and while most viruses are harmless, HPV infections can cause mild to serious health conditions - some can cause warts to form on the skin, while others can increase the risk of developing certain cancers.

## WHO GETS HPV?

HPV is very common—80% of people will have HPV at some point in their lives. Many people mistakenly think that HPV is something that only affects women—this is not the case. It is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) and is easily passed from one person to another, potentially affecting anyone.

HPV infections affecting the genital areas, mouth and throat are passed on through skin-to-skin contact, oral sex sexual intercourse (vaginal and anal). It can be very difficult to know if you have HPV as it often has no visible symptoms.

Cervical screening (as part of a pap or smear test) is a test offered to women to detect abnormal cells in the cervix which develop in to cervical cancer. In 2018 it is estimated that 570,000 women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer and over 98% of these cases will be caused by HPV. Screening tests are voluntary, but they are really important in detecting early changes to cells before they develop into cancer, making it much easier to treat and improving prognosis.

## WHAT HAPPENS IF ME OR MY PARTNER GET HPV?

HPV infects skin cells which makes it very easy to get and pass on, but very difficult to completely protect against. Most people who have an HPV infection won't know they have it because the body's immune system often destroys the virus before it causes symptoms.

Sometimes HPV can cause genital warts; if you notice any small bumps which are shaped a bit like a cauliflower, or itching and/or discomfort on/around your genitals, then you should contact your healthcare provider who can discuss treatment options with you.

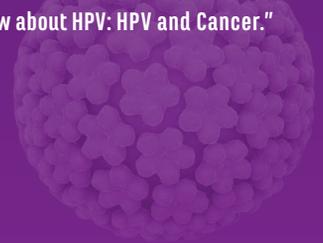
HPV is also linked to certain cancers such as cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, penis, anus. HPV can also cause cancer in the throat and mouth including the tongue and tonsils.

## SO, WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL IF HPV IS SO COMMON?

For many people, their immune systems can deal with HPV viruses, but for a small number of people, HPV can cause persistent infections, which cannot be cleared by the immune system and which can, over time, cause cells to change which can lead to the cancers mentioned above.

It is important to speak to your healthcare provider if you notice genital warts in order to detect and treat HPV early.

For some HPV-related cancers, such as cervical cancer, global screening programmes exist for women. HPV screening can help to identify women at higher risk of developing cervical cancer by detecting early signs of cell changes that can be treated before they develop into cancer. At the moment, screening programmes do not exist for other HPV-related cancers. For more information see ["What You Need to Know about HPV: HPV and Cancer."](#)



## CAN I PROTECT MYSELF FROM HPV?

Yes. There are several things you can do to reduce your risk of getting HPV. However, it is very difficult to entirely prevent HPV. If you do get an infection it doesn't mean you are less responsible about sex, or who you have sex with — remember most people don't know they have HPV.

However, there are certain things you can do to reduce your risk of getting HPV.



### VACCINATION

Vaccines which can help to protect against some types of HPV known to cause cervical cancer are available in some countries. Vaccinations are typically offered to girls who are around 12 years old, ideally before they have sexual contact and are exposed to HPV. Some countries also offer HPV vaccinations to men having sex with other men. For more information about HPV vaccination where you are, please speak to your local healthcare provider.



### CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING

In some countries cervical screening programmes exist for women aged 25 to 64 to check for abnormal cells in the cervix. During a screening test, sometimes referred to as a pap or smear test, a sample of the cervix is swabbed (collected) and sent to a laboratory for testing. The examination is not painful and typically takes a few minutes.



### CONDOMS

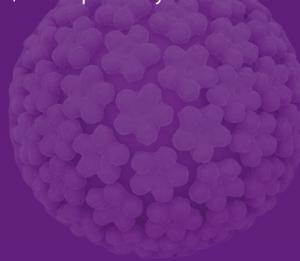
Condoms don't completely protect you from HPV during sex, because they only partially cover the skin on the genital tract. However, regular condom use reduces the risk.

It is very important to participate in screening programmes if you are eligible and ensure you have an HPV vaccine if it is available to you. If you are unsure if you can access screening programmes or have any questions about the HPV vaccine, please speak to your healthcare provider.

## WHAT CAN I DO TO LIVE WELL WITH HPV?

While you can't entirely protect against HPV there are several things you can do to reduce your risk. Make sure you get vaccinated against HPV, if that option is available to you. Women should ensure that you always participate in available cervical cancer screening programmes. It is also advisable to use condoms whenever you have sex in order to minimise the spread of HPV.

If you are concerned that you have genital warts or spreading HPV, then speak to your healthcare provider.



## TO STOP HPV, START TALKING!

Possibly the best way to prevent HPV from spreading and reduce the incidence of HPV-related cancers is through talking about HPV. Raising awareness of the virus and talking about it with sexual partners and healthcare professionals can reduce the spread of HPV and prevent more people developing HPV-related cancers.

For more information about HPV and its related conditions visit [askabouthpv.com](https://www.askabouthpv.com) where you can download additional information resources on HPV.

