HPV for Adults:
Testing, Prevention, and Cancer
What is HPV?

HPV is short for *human papillomavirus*. HPVs are a large group of related viruses. Each HPV virus in the group is given a number, which is called an *HPV type*.

Most HPV types cause warts on skin of the arms, chest, hands, and feet. Other types are found only on the body’s mucous membranes. Mucous membranes are the moist surfaces that cover organs and parts of the body that open to the outside, such as the vagina, anus, mouth, and throat. The HPV types found on mucous membranes do not live on the skin.

**Low-risk HPV types**

Some types of HPV can cause warts on or around the genitals and anus of both men and women. Women may also have warts on the cervix and in the vagina. Because these HPV types rarely cause cancer, they are called “low-risk” viruses.

**High-risk HPV types**

Other types of HPV have been linked to cancer in both men and women. These types are called “high-risk” viruses because they can cause cancer. Doctors worry more about the cell changes and precancers linked to these types, because they’re more likely to grow into cancers over time. Common high-risk HPV types include HPV 16 and 18.

Infection with HPV is very common. In most people, the body is able to get rid of the infection on its own. But sometimes, the infection doesn’t go away. Chronic, or long-lasting infection, especially when it’s caused by certain high-risk HPV types, can cause cancer over time.
How do people get HPV?

HPV can be passed from one person to another by skin-to-skin contact or sexual activity. This includes vaginal, anal, and oral sex. Even if a person waits to have sexual activity until marriage, or limits sexual activity to one partner, there can still be a risk for the HPV infection. It only takes one person, with the virus, to infect another person.

You cannot get HPV from:

- Toilet seats
- Hugging or holding hands
- Swimming in pools or hot tubs
- Sharing food or utensils
- Being unclean

You can have HPV:

- Even if it has been years since you were sexually active
- Even if you do not have any signs or symptoms

Cancer types linked to HPV infection

To learn more about any of the cancers listed here, visit our website at www.cancer.org or call our toll-free number at 1-800-227-2345.

Cervical cancer

Cervical cancer is the most common cancer linked to HPV in people with a cervix. Almost all cervical cancers are caused by HPV.

Cervical cancer can be found early and even prevented with routine screening tests. The Pap test looks for changes in cervical cells caused by HPV infection. HPV tests look for the infection itself.
Vulvar cancer

HPV can also cause cancer of the vulva, which is the outer part of the female genital organs. This is a much less common cancer than cervical cancer.

There’s no standard screening test for this cancer other than routine physical exams.

Vaginal cancer

Vaginal cancers are also less common than cervical cancer, but most vaginal cancers contain HPV.

Many vaginal precancers also contain HPV, and these changes may be present for years before turning into cancer. These precancers can sometimes be found with the same Pap test that’s used to test for cervical cancer and precancer. If a precancer is found, it can be treated, helping stop cancer before it really starts.

Penile cancer

In men, HPV can cause cancer of the penis. It’s more common in men with HIV and those who have sex with other men.

There’s no standard screening test to find early signs of penile cancer. Because almost all penile cancers start under the foreskin of the penis, many can be found early when they are small.

Anal cancer

HPV causes most squamous cell cancers of the anus in both men and women. It’s more common in people with HIV and in men who have sex with other men.
Screening tests for anal cancer are not routinely recommended for all people. Still, some experts recommend anal cytology testing (also called an anal Pap test because it’s much like the Pap test used for cervical cancer) for people at higher risk for anal cancer. This includes men and women who engage in receptive anal sex, women who have had cervical cancer or vulvar cancer, anyone who is HIV-positive, and anyone who has had an organ transplant. Talk to your doctor about whether screening for anal cancer might be right for you.

**Mouth and throat cancer**

HPV is found in mouth and throat cancers in men and women. Most cancers found in the back of the throat, including the base of the tongue and tonsils, are HPV-related. These are the most common HPV-related cancers in men.

There’s no standard screening test to find these cancers early. Still, many can be found early during routine exams by a dentist, doctor, dental hygienist, or by self-exam.

**Can HPV infection be prevented?**

There’s no sure way to prevent infection with all the different types of HPV, but the HPV vaccine can help protect young people from these six types of cancer.

**Use of condoms**

Condoms (“rubbers”) provide some protection against HPV, but they do not completely prevent infection.

Condoms must be used correctly every time sex happens. Still, condoms can’t protect fully because they don’t cover every possible HPV-infected area of the body, such as the skin on the genital or anal area. Still, condoms do give some protection against HPV, and they also help protect against HIV and some other sexually transmitted diseases.
The HPV vaccine

The HPV vaccine can help prevent infection with certain types of HPV that cause most HPV cancers, as well as genital warts. The HPV vaccine is recommended for use in males and females. It can only prevent HPV infection; it doesn’t help treat a current infection. To work best, the vaccine should be given between the ages of 9 and 12.

Children and young adults age 13 through 26 who have not been vaccinated, or who haven’t gotten all their doses, should get the vaccine as soon as possible. Vaccination at the recommended ages will help prevent more cancers than vaccination at older ages.

Contact your American Cancer Society for more on the HPV vaccine.

Testing for HPV

The HPV tests on the market are only approved to find cervical HPV infection in people with a cervix. They can be used to help test people with a cervix at certain ages and after certain Pap test findings to help look for cervical cancer.

• There’s no approved HPV test to find HPV on the penis, anus, vulva, mouth, or throat.

• There’s no test to check one’s overall “HPV status.”

• The American Cancer Society recommends that people ages 25 to 65 who have a cervix and are at average risk for cervical cancer get a primary HPV test every 5 years. A primary HPV test is an HPV test that is done by itself for screening.

If primary HPV testing is not available, “co-testing” or a Pap test alone can be done. “Co-testing” is testing that combines an HPV test with a Pap test and should be done every 5 years. A Pap test alone should be done every 3 years. The HPV test shows whether a person has an HPV infection that can increase their risk for cervical cancer. A Pap test can find cell changes that might be precancer or cancer caused by HPV.
Treatment for HPV or HPV-related diseases

There’s no treatment for the HPV virus, but there are treatments for the cell changes that HPV can cause.

Cancer is easiest to treat when it’s found early – while it’s small and before it has spread. Some cancer screening tests can find early cell changes caused by HPV, and these changes can be treated before they become cancer.

Genital warts that can be easily seen can be removed with prescribed medicines. They can also be treated by a health care provider.

Things to remember about HPV

- HPV is a very common virus. Most people who have ever had any type of sexual activity will get HPV at some time in their lives, but in most cases it goes away without treatment.
- Certain people are at higher risk for HPV-related health problems. This includes gay and bisexual men, and people with weak immune systems (including those who have HIV/AIDS).
- There is no treatment for HPV infection, but a vaccine can help prevent it.
- Having HPV does not mean you will get cancer, but the HPV vaccine can help prevent infection from high-risk types linked with six different cancers.
- Most cervical cancers can be prevented with regular screening.
Read this booklet to learn more about:

- HPV and its link to cancer
- How HPV is spread
- HPV vaccine for young males and females

For cancer information, day-to-day help, and emotional support, call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345**, or visit us online at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org). We’re here when you need us.