



# HPV for Adults:

## Prevention, Testing, and Cancer



Human papillomavirus (HPV) has been shown to cause certain kinds of cancer.

You can lower your risk of getting an HPV-related cancer by:

- Taking steps to help avoid getting the HPV virus
- Getting regular screening to find any pre-cancer changes early so they can be treated before they become cancer

# What is HPV?

HPV is short for *human papillomavirus*. HPVs are a large group of related viruses that cause infections. 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 and not on the skin. 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 are sometimes called *genital HPV*. It's important to know that genital HPV is not the same as HIV or herpes.

HPV is divided into 2 main groups:

## **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 are called “high-risk” viruses because they can cause cancer. Doctors worry more about the cell changes and pre-cancers 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, such as occurs with sexual activity. This includes vaginal, anal, and oral sex.

HPV can be spread even when an infected person has no visible signs or symptoms. The virus can also be spread by genital contact without sex, although this is not common.

Most men and women who have ever had sex get at least one type of genital HPV at some time in their lives. Anyone who has had sex can get HPV, even if it was only with one person. But infections are more likely in people who have had many sex partners. Even if a person delays sexual activity until marriage, or only has one partner, they are still at risk of HPV infection if their partner has been exposed.

**You cannot get HPV** from toilet seats, hugging or holding hands, swimming in pools or hot tubs, sharing food or utensils, or being unclean.

**You can have HPV** even if it's been years since you were sexually active or if you do not have signs or symptoms.

# Cancer types linked to HPV infection

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

Some cancers can be found early by screening tests. These tests can find early cancers before people have symptoms.

## Cervical cancer

Cervical cancer (cancer of the cervix) is the most common cancer caused by HPV. In fact, nearly all cervical cancers are caused by HPV.

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

Cervical cancer is preventable with vaccines and regular screening tests. More than half of the people in the United States who get cervical cancer have never had – or have rarely had – screening tests.

## **Vulvar cancer**

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

There's no standard screening test for this cancer other than regular physical exams.

## **Vaginal cancer**

Most vaginal cancers contain HPV, including most vaginal pre-cancers.

Pre-cancers may be present for years before turning into cancer. They can sometimes be found with the same test that's used to screen for cervical cancer. If a pre-cancer is found, it can be treated, helping stop cancer before it starts.

## **Penile cancer**

HPV can cause cancer of the penis. It's more common in men with HIV and men 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 can cause cancer 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 commonly recommended for all people. Still, some experts recommend anal cytology testing for people at higher risk for anal cancer. This test is called an anal Pap test because it's much like the Pap test that can be used for cervical cancer screening.

Men who have sex with other men, people who have had cervical cancer or vulvar cancer, anyone who is HIV-positive, and anyone who has had an organ transplant could be at higher risk for anal cancer caused by HPV.

## **Mouth and throat cancer**

HPV is found in mouth and throat cancers. 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 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 there are things you can do to lower your chances of being infected.

### **Use of condoms**

Condoms 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 some other sexually transmitted infections.

A new condom should be used with each sex act. The condom should be put on BEFORE any genital, oral, or anal contact and kept on until sex is finished.

## Limiting sex partners

Limiting the number of sex partners and avoiding sex with people who have had many other sex partners can help lower your risk of exposure to HPV.

## HPV vaccines

HPV vaccines can help prevent infection with certain types of HPV that cause most HPV-related cancers, as well as anal and genital warts. HPV vaccines are approved for use in males and females. They can only prevent HPV infection; they don't treat a current infection. To work best, the vaccine should be given between the ages of **9 and 12**.

Children and young adults ages **13 through 26** who have not been vaccinated against HPV, or who haven't gotten all

their doses, should get the vaccine as soon as possible. HPV vaccination of young adults will not prevent as many cancers as vaccination of children and teens. The American Cancer Society does not recommended HPV vaccines for people older than 26 years of age.

For more information about HPV vaccines, visit the American Cancer Society website at [cancer.org/hpv-vaccines](https://www.cancer.org/hpv-vaccines) or call us at **1-800-227-2345**.



# 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 alone or as part of a co-test (when an HPV test and a Pap test are done at the same time).

- There's no approved HPV test to find HPV on the penis, anus, vulva, mouth, or throat.
- There's no test to check a person's overall "HPV status."
- The American Cancer Society recommends that people who have a cervix and are between the ages of 25 and 65 get a primary HPV test every 5 years. Because a primary HPV test may not be an option everywhere, a co-test every 5 years or a Pap test every 3 years is still a good option.

# Treatment for 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. These changes can be treated before they become cancer.

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

# Things to remember about HPV

- HPV is a very common group of viruses. Most people who have had any type of sexual contact will get HPV at some time in their lives.
- There is no treatment for HPV, but in most cases it goes away without treatment.
- Having HPV does not mean you will get cancer. There are many types of HPV, and most don't cause cancer.
- Cell changes caused by HPV can often be treated so they don't turn into cancer.
- Certain people are at higher risk for HPV-related health problems. This includes men who have sex with other men and people with weak immune systems (including those who have HIV/AIDS).
- Most HPV infections that lead to cancer can be prevented with vaccines.
- Most cervical cancers can be prevented with regular screening and treatment of pre-cancers.



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 support, visit the American Cancer Society website at **cancer.org** or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.



[cancer.org](https://cancer.org) | 1.800.227.2345

