



HPV Info for Men

Patient Education Series

What is HPV?

The Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a virus that invades the living skin cells and is carried only in the skin. Because it is so common, once you have had more than 3 partners, it is very likely that you have been exposed to HPV. But because there is no general screening test, there is no way to know, other than seeing warts, that you have become infected. Genital warts have become the leading sexually transmitted infection (STI), with over one million new cases per year. This is not a new disease, but certainly one whose incidence (new cases per year) is increasing. There are 100 types of HPV virus that cause warts.

Why worry about HPV?

HPV types 6 and 16 have been shown to cause cancer. In men, both penile and anal cancer has been shown to arise from untreated warts, although not frequently. In women, most cervical cancer arises from long-term untreated HPV infection, and in fact is usually not found in women until the PAP smear is read as having abnormal changes. Thus, the risk for women is much higher.

Where do warts occur?

The most frequent location in the male is on the outside of the penis. However, they may be found in other locations such as the anal area, inside the penis, or pubic area. An examination will include the penis and rectal areas.

What to expect during an examination for HPV

Be reassured that the visit will be painless for you. First, the outside of the penis, scrotum (sac), and anal regions are examined for signs of obvious warts, using direct light and magnification. When a suspicious growth is found, your penis may be wrapped in 3% acetic acid-soaked gauze. This does not hurt at all, but does smell like vinegar. After 5 minutes of incubation, the penis is examined with a magnifying glass to detect white plaques, known as aceto-white lesions, which may represent HPV lesions.

What if warts are found?

Some small warts may be effectively treated with a topical acid product that is applied during your office visit. There will be some burning sensation, which is short-lived and generally well-tolerated. Warts can also be frozen off with liquid nitrogen. There are also prescription topical treatments that can be applied on a given schedule. The over-the-counter wart treatments should never be used on genital warts.

What about other STIs?

Unfortunately, they tend to occur in the same sexually active group of individuals. The possibility of a second infection unrelated to genital warts exists, such as non-specific urethritis, syphilis, molluscum contagiosum, gonorrhea, etc. The physical exam and lab tests can be used in evaluation for these other infections. And for anyone who is/has been sexually active with a partner, we will recommend an HIV screening test.

Is HPV always transmitted sexually? How do I know who had HPV first?

If genital warts are present, it is safest to assume that the HPV was sexually acquired. The time of infection cannot be determined from the lesions, thus we will never know who caught the virus first. Because the incubation period can be so long (often more than a year) and variable, it is very difficult to determine when the infection originally occurred.

HPV Vaccine

The HPV vaccine, given to women through age 26, is a 3 shot series that confers considerable protection against external warts and against the acquisition of HPV in the cervix, which can cause cervical cancer. Not all women receive the vaccine as it is very expensive. There is no vaccine for men.

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