

# Common Questions about HPV and Cervical Cancer



For Women Who Have HPV



*This information is for women who have the type of genital human papillomavirus (pap-ah-LO-mah-VYE-rus)—also just called HPV—that can sometimes lead to cervical cancer.*

### **What is HPV?**

HPV is a common virus. There are about 40 types of HPV that affect the genitals or sex organs of men and women. Some HPV types can cause genital warts. Other types can infect a woman's cervix and lead to cervical cancer over many years. But most of the time, HPV causes no symptoms or health problems and goes away by itself within two years. Experts do not know why HPV goes away in so many, but not all women.

### **How did I get HPV? Who gave it to me?**

HPV is passed on through genital contact, most often during vaginal and anal sex. Most people never even know they have HPV or that they are passing it to their partner. For this reason, it may not be possible to know who gave you HPV or when you got it. HPV is so common that most people get it soon after they start having sex. In cases when HPV does not go away on its own, it may only be found years later.

### **Are there other ways I could have gotten HPV?**

There are many myths about how people get HPV. You cannot get HPV from being unclean, from toilet seats, or from having an abortion. Also, you are not more likely to get HPV from having rough sex or sex during your period.



*This is my first time hearing about HPV. Does having HPV mean I will get cancer? Will I still be able to have babies?*

### **How does HPV cause cervical cancer?**

HPV can cause normal cells on your cervix to turn abnormal. Most of the time, HPV goes away on its own. When HPV goes away, your cervical cells go back to normal. But if HPV lingers for many years, these abnormal cells can turn into cancer.

### **Can I prevent cervical cancer?**

Yes. You can get screening tests that can find early signs of cervical cancer before you ever get sick. That way, problems can be found and removed before they ever become cancer. The Pap test and HPV test are cervical cancer screening tests.

### **How is the Pap test different from the HPV test?**

Both of these tests help screen for cervical cancer, but they look for different things. The Pap test looks for cell changes on your cervix that could develop into cervical cancer. The HPV test looks for HPV, the virus that can cause these cell changes.

### **How likely am I to get cancer if I have HPV?**

Few women who have HPV get cervical cancer—as long as they follow their doctor's advice for needed testing or treatment. If you have HPV, your doctor may check up on you more often and do more tests to look for changes on your cervix. That way, your doctor can find and treat any changes early, so you don't get cervical cancer. Be sure to follow up with your doctor!



### **Is there a treatment for HPV?**

There is no treatment for HPV, but most people's bodies do eventually fight the virus off. There are treatments for the health problems that HPV can cause—like genital warts, cervical cell changes, and cervical cancer. Once abnormal cells are treated (removed), you may need to get Pap tests more often to make sure they do not come back.

### **Will I have HPV forever?**

In most women, HPV goes away within two years. We do not know why it lasts longer in some women than others.

### **If HPV goes away, can I get it again?**

If you have one type of HPV that goes away, you may not get that type again. But you still can get a different type. Remember, there are about 40 types of HPV that can infect the genital area.

### **Does having HPV affect my chances of getting pregnant or having healthy babies?**

Having HPV does not make it harder to get or stay pregnant. The type of HPV you have should not affect the health of your future babies. But if you need treatment for abnormal cells (caused by HPV), the treatment could affect your chance of having babies. Ask your doctor if your treatment can impact your ability to get pregnant.

### **Will I pass HPV to my current partner?**

If you have HPV and have been with your partner for a while, your partner is likely to have HPV too. There is no way to know if your partner gave you HPV, or if you gave HPV to your partner.

### **Can I prevent passing HPV to a new partner?**

Condoms may lower your chances of passing HPV to your new partner, if used all the time and the right way. But HPV can infect areas that are not covered by a condom—so condoms may not fully protect against HPV. The only sure way to prevent passing HPV to a partner is not to have sex.

### **Can my male partner get tested for HPV?**

Right now, there is no HPV test for men. HPV is just as common in men as in women, but its health complications tend to be more serious in women. The types of HPV that put you at risk for cervical cancer rarely cause health problems for most men.





### **How do I talk to my partner about HPV?**

You and your partner may benefit from talking openly about HPV. You can tell your partner that:

- HPV is very common. It can infect the genital areas of both men and women. It usually has no signs or symptoms.
- Most sexually active people get HPV at some time in their lives, though most will never know it. People with only one lifetime sex partner can get HPV, if their partner was infected with HPV.
- Most of the time, the body fights off HPV naturally. But in some people, HPV does not go away.
- There is no test yet for men to find out if they have HPV. But the most common health problem caused by HPV in men is genital warts. And the type of HPV found on your HPV test does not cause genital warts.
- Partners who have been together for a while tend to share HPV. This means that your partner likely has HPV also, even though your partner may have no signs or symptoms.
- Having HPV does not mean that you or your partner is having sex outside of your relationship. There is no sure way to know when you got HPV. A person can have HPV for many years before it is found.

If your sex partner is female, you should talk to her about the link between HPV and cervical cancer, and encourage her to get screened for cervical cancer.

### **I heard about a new HPV vaccine. Can it help me?**

A new HPV vaccine is now available for females, ages 9 to 26 years. It protects against the four HPV types that cause most cervical cancers and genital warts. But it does not treat existing HPV, cervical cell changes, or genital warts. The vaccine will be most effective in females who have not yet had sex since they are unlikely to have HPV. But young sexually active females may still benefit. The vaccine has not yet been tested with women older than 26 years. It may be available one day for women over 26, if it is found to be safe and effective for them. In the meantime, if you are 26 years or younger, ask your doctor if this vaccine is right for you.

#### **For more information, call or visit:**

##### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

1-800-CDC-INFO or 1-800-232-4636

[www.cdc.gov/std/hpv](http://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv) or

[www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/)

##### **American Cancer Society (ACS)**

1-800-ACS-2345 or 1-800-227-2345

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

