



Human Papillomavirus, or HPV

What is HPV?

Infections with mucosal HPV types are the most frequent sexually transmitted infection (STI), and are considered highly transmissible. There are over 100 different HPV types and some of them have been called “mucosal types” because they prefer the moist body parts open to the exterior like the anus, vagina, mouth, vagina, penis, etc. Other types will prefer dry skin like the hands and the feet.

The mucosal HPV types are either low-risk or high-risk:

- Low-risk HPV most often cause genital warts, benign lesions, or show no symptoms at all.
- High-risk HPV can cause lesions that can turn in a cancer if they are not detected and treated. Many infections with high-risk HPV will show no symptoms and will never evolve in a cancer. The cancers that have been related to a HPV infection are those of the cervix, vulva, vagina, penis, scrotum, anus, throat and larynx.

Who is at risk?

Men and women of all ages are at risk of HPV. In fact, 75 per cent of all Canadians will get HPV at some point in their lives. However, these infections occur most often in teenagers and young adults. The highest rates of HPV in Canada are among men and women between the ages 15-24¹.

In Canada, up to one million people of all ages develop an (STI) every year. First Nations, Inuit and Métis women are more likely than non-Aboriginal women of the same age to become infected with an STI.²

How can I get HPV?

Anyone who has ever had a sexual encounter can get infected with one or many HPV types. Even if you only had sex once with one partner, you are still at risk of being infected. It is not necessary to have intercourse to get HPV. The most common way to spread HPV is through skin-to-skin contact during any sexual activity with the penis, scrotum, vagina, vulva, or anus. You can also get HPV by kissing or using your mouth on someone's genitals or anus, or sharing sex toys.

How do I know if I have HPV?

A HPV infection often has no signs or symptoms. Most people will get HPV at some point in their lives, but remain symptom-free while the infection clears up on its own. You may not be able to tell if you or your partner(s) has contracted HPV. However, signs of HPV can include itching, burning and red or white cauliflower-like warts on or inside the genitals. If there are warts, they will likely appear within weeks or even several months after sexual contact with a partner infected with HPV.

There are treatments for HPV infections that are symptomatic. If you notice symptoms or suspect you have HPV, you should consult with your doctor or nurse for treatment.

How can I protect myself?

HPV is easily passed from person to person during any skin-to-skin sexual activity. Abstaining from all sexual contact, even if there is no penetration, is the only way to avoid contracting the HPV.

However, you can reduce the risk of getting HPV by taking the following precautions:



• **HPV vaccine:** The HPV vaccine is effective for preventing four specific types of HPV that cause 90 per cent of genital warts and 70 per cent of cervical cancers, and other a lower proportion of the other HPV-related cancers mentioned earlier.

• **Regular Pap testing:** A Pap test is the only way to detect abnormal cells in the cervix that could lead to cervical cancer later in life. Health Canada recommends young women get a Pap test within three years of becoming sexually active, and repeat testing every two years.

• **Quit smoking:** Smoking reduces the body's ability to fight HPV infection, and is a factor in the development of various cancers.

• **Condoms and dental dams:** When used properly and every time, condoms and dental dams can reduce the risk of contracting many STIs. This includes use during any sexual activity, even without penetration, such as touching, rubbing, or kissing or using your mouth on your partner's vulva, vagina, penis, scrotum, and anus. Condoms and dentals dams do not provide full protection from HPV, as you can still get infected by skin that is not covered.

HPV Vaccine

The HPV vaccine was approved for use in Canada in July 2006. Current clinical scientific evidence suggests that the HPV vaccine is safe with very few side effects. The Canadian National Advisory Committee on Immunization recommends HPV vaccination for all Canadian girls and young women aged 9 to 26.

Important facts to remember:

- The HPV vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV.
- The HPV vaccine is not a cure, and cannot treat people already infected with HPV.
- The HPV vaccine is not a substitute for cervical cancer screening. Even if vaccinated, women should receive regular Pap tests to reduce the risk of cervical cancer.

For more information on cervical cancer, see NAHO's fact sheet entitled *Cervical Cancer and Screening*.

How can I get the HPV vaccine?

Health coverage for medications and vaccines varies in each province and territory. For more information, check with your provincial/territorial public health department or your local health centre.



1 The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. (2009). *HPVinfo.ca*. Retrieved April 11, 2009 from <http://www.hpvinfos.ca>.

2 Audrey Steenbeek, "Empowering Health Promotion: A holistic Approach in Preventing Sexually Transmitted Infections Among First Nations and Inuit Adolescents in Canada", 22 (3) *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 2004, p. 255.



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