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GET THE FACTS

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*Administered by the Society of
Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada*

What is HPV?

The Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common, highly contagious virus that is spread by skin-to-skin contact (penetration is not required) or during genital, anal or oral sex. There are more than 100 different types of HPV with at least 40 that cause genital warts and cancer.

What are genital warts?

Genital warts are ugly growths that look like small cauliflowers. They can be red or white, can sometimes cause itching or burning, and are found on or inside the sex organs in both women and men. If left untreated, they very rarely develop into cancer.

What type of cancer does HPV cause?

In women, HPV has been linked to cancer of the cervix, vulva, and vagina and in men, to cancer of the penis. In both women and men, it has been linked to cancer of the anus, head and neck (mouth and throat).

Who is at risk?

Anyone who is sexually active is at risk for HPV. The highest rates of HPV infection are in young people aged 15 to 24. If you are in this age group, you are more likely to get the virus.

How do I know if I have HPV?

It could be that you will never get HPV, or that you'll get it and your body will cure itself on its own. It is important to know that almost 8 out of 10 Canadians will get HPV in their lifetimes. Since HPV infections often have no signs or symptoms, you may not be able to tell if you or your partner are infected.

Is there a cure?

There is no cure for the virus once you are infected. There are treatments for the genital warts and cell changes caused by the virus, but these do not cure the virus itself. If infected, the immune system will eventually clear the virus in most people. However, this does not mean that people will be immune. They can still get another HPV infection in the future.

How do I protect myself?

Condoms are a good way to protect yourself from many kinds of sexually transmitted infections. Use them consistently. But when it comes to HPV, a condom does not provide full protection. You can still get HPV from infected skin not covered by the condom.

What does a Pap test do?

It detects cell changes in the cervix before they have time to turn into cancer. If you are female, you should talk to your doctor about when to get a Pap test. In most provinces it will be at age 21.

Is there anything more I can do?

Vaccination is up to 99% effective at preventing the HPV types responsible for most genital warts and HPV-related cancers. There are three vaccines that are available and approved for use in Canada, each of which protects against certain HPV types.

Who can be vaccinated?

In Canada, vaccination is approved for females aged 9-45 and males aged 9-26.



Did you know?

- Any person who has sexual contact with another person can get HPV. You may be at risk even if you have only one partner because your partner may have had other partners in the past.
- Vaccination works best before you become sexually active because you have not yet been exposed to any types of HPV preventable by the vaccines.
- You can be vaccinated if you are already sexually active or have already had an HPV infection because you probably have not been exposed to all types of HPV that you can be protected against.

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To learn more about HPV, visit:

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