

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)



This health information is general information only. If you have any concerns about your sexual health, please see a doctor or visit one of our clinics.

Family Planning Victoria clinics

For people under 25

Action Centre

Melbourne CBD
Level 1, 94 Elizabeth Street
Melbourne
T/ 03 9660 4700 or
1800 013 952 (free call)
Mon–Fri, drop-in 12.00–5.00pm

Action Centre

Hoppers Crossing
Youth Resource Centre
82 Derrimut Road
Hoppers Crossing
T/ 03 9742 8155 or 03 9660 4700
Tuesdays, drop-in 12.00–5.00pm

For everyone

Box Hill

Ground floor, 901 Whitehorse Road
Box Hill
T/ 03 9257 0100
Mon–Fri, appointments mornings
Drop-in 1.00–4.00pm

Cranbourne

Cranbourne Integrated Care Centre
140–154 Sladen Street
Cranbourne
T/ 03 5990 6789
Tuesdays, appointments mornings
Drop-in 2.00–5.00pm

www.fpv.org.au



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Sexual & Reproductive Health
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What is it?

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is also known as 'wart virus'. There are over 100 different sub-types of HPV. Some cause warts on your hands or genitals. Others cause various types of cancer, including cancer of the cervix in women and cancer of the anus and genitals in men.

Genital HPV is so common it's almost considered a normal part of being sexually active. Around four out of five people have it at some stage, often without even knowing.

How do you get it?

The more sexual partners you have, the more likely you are to be exposed to HPV.

If you have sex with an infected person, your risk of catching HPV is 50 to 80 per cent.

You catch HPV through contact with infected skin or the soft linings of the mouth and genitals (mucosal surfaces). For genital HPV, this usually happens during unprotected sex.

What are the symptoms?

People's bodies react differently to HPV infection.

Most people have no symptoms, but can pass the infection on to someone else who may develop genital warts.

Women infected with HPV can also develop abnormalities in the cells of the cervix. This is called dysplasia.

People who practise anal sex and become infected with HPV can develop anal cancer.

There appears to be a link between HPV, oral sex and cancers of the mouth and throat.

Warts

Genital warts look very similar to other warts and are usually white or flesh coloured. They can be minuscule growths or large lumps. Some people only have a few and others may have lots. You can get warts in the anal area even if you haven't had anal sex.

The time between catching the virus and having warts varies. Some people may take a year or more to develop symptoms, so the appearance of warts doesn't help you work out when you were infected.

Most genital HPV infections are no longer detectable within 12 to 24 months after first exposure. You may only know you have been infected if you have an abnormal Pap test result or if genital warts appear.

Dysplasia

HPV can also cause dysplasia, an abnormal change to the cells that cover the cervix.

Dysplasia is sometimes incorrectly called 'pre-cancer' of the cervix, but dysplasia is not cancer.

If left alone, most dysplasia will return to normal, though a small percentage may become more severe and can lead to cancer after many years.

If your doctor finds HPV abnormalities in your Pap test, you need careful follow-up to monitor and treat any future changes.

What tests will I need?

Usually, the diagnosis of genital warts is clinical. This means the doctor will see typical warts and you won't need any other tests. Occasionally, if the warts don't look typical, a small piece of wart will be cut out under local anaesthetic (biopsy) to confirm the diagnosis.

Pap tests

Routine Pap tests are the most common test for detecting HPV infection. If your Pap test shows signs of HPV, it's usually nothing to worry about. Every year in Australia, approximately 90 000 women have a minor change in their Pap test due to HPV.

Your body will usually clear the infection and your Pap test will return to normal. Your doctor or nurse will ask you to have your next Pap test sooner than usual, but you won't need any treatment at this stage.

Colposcopy

If the Pap test abnormalities don't go back to normal, another examination, called a colposcopy, is recommended. This involves looking at the cervix with a magnifying instrument. This is done by a specialist.

Sometimes during the colposcopy, a small piece of tissue (a biopsy) is taken for examination. If this confirms dysplasia, your doctor will recommend treatment such as burning, freezing or cutting out the abnormal cells.

This treatment will prevent the development of cervical cancer in nearly all women. It's very safe and should not affect your ability to have children.

How is it treated?

There is no cure for HPV. Once you have the virus, it stays in your body until it is eventually cleared by your immune system.

Treatment of visible warts is not always necessary.

If you need treatment, you have a variety of options including paints, creams, laser and freezing. Some paints or creams can be used at home after diagnosis, but careful monitoring is needed. Laser and freezing are done in the clinic.

If you are pregnant or think you might be, tell your doctor, so you can use a treatment that won't be harmful to you or your baby.

Don't use over the counter wart treatments on genital warts, as they are not designed for the sensitive skin around the genital area.

Treatment is usually effective, but you need to be patient. You may need a number of treatments and warts can come back even after they look like they have completely gone.

Should my partner/s be treated?

If you have had unprotected sex with your partner and one of you has been diagnosed with HPV, there is a high chance you are both infected, even though only one of you may have symptoms.

In this situation, starting to use protection is probably of no use to you. But you should use condoms and 'dental' dams with any new partner to reduce their risk of HPV infection.

When can I have sex again?

There is no reason to avoid sex if you have an abnormal Pap test. If you are having treatment to your cervical cells or warts, your doctor will tell you if you need to avoid sex until healing occurs.

Creams such as imiquamod are applied to warts at night and shouldn't be applied until after sex, as they may irritate your partner's skin and damage latex condoms or dams.

What will happen if it's not treated?

Genital warts do not need to be treated unless they are uncomfortable or you think they are unsightly. Your immune system will eventually rid your body of them.

If cervical HPV lesions are not closely followed up and treated, you are at an increased risk of cervical cancer.

Will it come back?

It is not uncommon for warts to come back until the body develops immunity to the virus. This can take months or years.

Smoking may delay your body clearing the virus.

How can I avoid it?

Protection

The most important thing you can do is protect yourself during sex by using barrier protection e.g. male and female condoms and dams.

A dam is a thin latex sheet placed over any part of the body for safer oral sex, but as HPV usually infects a large area of skin, total protection can't be guaranteed.

Pap tests

Having a Pap test every two years is the best protection against cervical cancer.

Immunisation

You can have a vaccination injection to immunise you against the HPV sub-types most commonly linked to cervical cancer and genital warts. It's most effective if you have it before you are exposed to HPV (i.e. before you become sexually active). That's why the HPV vaccine, Gardasil, is now being given to girls in Year 7.

Not all types of HPV associated with cervical cancer are covered by the vaccination, so you still need to have regular Pap tests as soon as you become sexually active, even if you've been vaccinated.

The vaccine is also effective in boys, and they can get it through their GP.

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