

## Is any special preparation needed for an HPV test?

You can take the same measures you usually take for a Pap smear, as both tests are usually done at the same time using the same sample:

- Try not to schedule your doctor's appointment during your menstrual period, as your doctor can collect a better sample of cervical cells when you are not menstruating.
- Avoid sexual intercourse, douching, or using any vaginal medicines for two days before the test.

## What information is obtained from an HPV test?

The laboratory test for HPV looks for the DNA of the virus and, if present, determines whether it belongs to a high-risk type, especially types 16 and 18. It is important to remember that the HPV test is a screening test for cervical cancer, but it does not tell you whether you have cancer. The presence of high-risk HPVs is a warning sign that you are at increased risk for cervical cancer.

The report that is sent to your doctor will state either that HPV has been detected, or not detected. Whenever HPV has been detected the report will also indicate whether it's type 16 or 18, or one of the less common high-risk types. If cervical cytology (Pap smear) has also been requested, information will be provided about any cell abnormalities that may be present, whether due to HPV or not. Based on this information your doctor will advise you on appropriate management.

## How can the risk of HPV infection and cancer of the cervix be reduced?

Safer sex practices, including the use of a condom for intercourse, will reduce the risk of infection. Condoms are not 100% effective in the prevention of HPV infection because they protect only the covered area. Other forms of birth control give no protection against HPV infection.

Two vaccines, Cervarix and Gardasil, are available that offer considerable protection against certain HPV types. Both vaccines protect against high-risk types 16 and 18; Gardasil also protects against types 6 and 11, which are common causes of genital warts. The vaccines are equally effective in men and women, and should ideally be administered at a young age before an individual acquires HPV infection. This is why it is best to get the HPV vaccine before you have sex for the first time. The HPV vaccine cannot cure an HPV infection that you already have.

Speak to your doctor or other healthcare provider for more information.

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## WHAT IS HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS AND WHY SHOULD I BE TESTED?

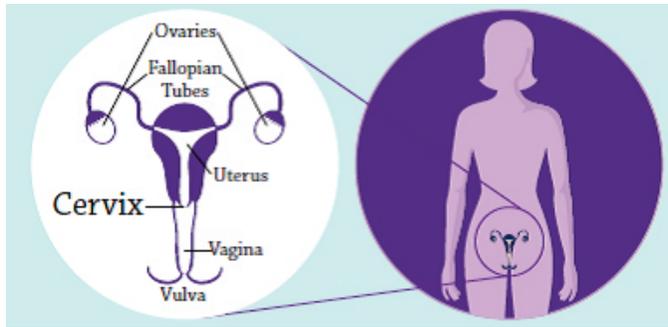


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## What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is a virus that is spread from person to person by skin-to-skin contact. It can infect the skin, the mouth and throat, the rectum and the anus. It can also infect both the male and female genital areas, including the penis, the vulva, the lining of the vagina and the cervix. There are over 100 types of HPV of which about 40 types can be sexually transmitted. HPV infection is very common. Research suggests that the majority of sexually active people will get a genital HPV infection at some time during their lives.



## What are the signs and symptoms of HPV infection?

HPV can live on the skin or mucous membranes, including those of the genital tract, without causing any signs or symptoms. Most people do not know they're infected with HPV, and the majority of people with HPV will eventually clear the infection on their own, without any treatment.

HPV can cause warts ("papillomas"). Certain HPV types give rise to common skin warts that often occur on the hands and feet. Other types, mainly types 6 and 11, can cause genital warts, which are NOT associated with cancer.

Genital warts can appear on the vulva, vagina, penis, scrotum, groin, thigh or area around the anus. It may take weeks to months for warts to appear after sexual contact, and it is not usually possible to know when and how you were infected.

## How is HPV transmitted?

Genital HPV infection is primarily spread through vaginal, anal or oral sex, but sexual intercourse is not required for infection to occur. HPV can be transmitted by other types of sexual contact. HPV cannot be spread by blood, other body fluids, touching objects such as a toilet seat, swimming in pools, or sharing food or utensils.

## Does HPV cause cancer?

Yes, it can when the body is not able to clear the infection on its own and it becomes chronic. Infection with some types of HPV, called "high-risk HPV", does not cause warts but occasionally gives rise to cancer of the cervix. Rarely, high-risk HPV can lead to cancer of the vulva, vagina, anus or penis. There are several high-risk HPVs of which the most important are called "type 16" and "type 18".

## How does HPV cause cancer of the cervix?

The cervix is covered by a thin layer of cells. If one or more high-risk HPVs is present, it can enter these cells and cause them to grow in an unusual way. The changes in these cells progress in stages, from what is termed "atypia" to "dysplasia" and then "cervical intra-epithelial neoplasia" (CIN). These are pre-cancerous. In many women with these cell changes, the body's defences eliminate

HPV before it causes further abnormalities. In some women, however, persistent high-risk HPV infection eventually lead to cancer.

## Who should be tested for HPV?

It is recommended that all women over the age of 30 should, at least once in their lifetime, have an HPV test to know if they are infected with any of the high-risk HPVs. Women, regardless of age, who have abnormal Pap smear results would also benefit from HPV testing.

## How is HPV infection diagnosed?

Genital warts are diagnosed by examining the skin and soft tissues of the anal and genital area. Oral warts are diagnosed by examining the lining of the mouth and throat.

HPV infection of the cervix is detected by running a brush around the cervix to collect cells from its thin lining. This sample can be used to test for HPV and, if requested by your doctor, for examination of the cervical cells (this is called a "Pap smear" or "cervical cytology"). Doing both a Pap smear and HPV test at the same time is sometimes referred to as "co-testing".

