

# Understanding HPV



According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the human papillomavirus (HPV) is a group of related viruses that are easily spread by sexual contact, and it is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the U.S. It is possible to have HPV without knowing it and pass the infection to others. While most HPV infections are harmless, some are not and can lead to serious problems, including certain cancers.

## Signs and Symptoms

In most cases, HPV does not have any symptoms and simply clears up on its own, without causing any health problems. However, according to the CDC, some types of HPV will not go away, and can cause any of the following:

**Genital warts** – These usually appear as a small bump or groups of bumps in the genital area. They can be small or large, raised or flat, or shaped like a cauliflower.

**Cervical cancer** – This cancer rarely shows any symptoms until it has advanced, making it very serious and hard to treat. For these reasons, it is important for women to get regular screenings for cervical cancer.

**Other HPV-related cancers** – These cancers might not show any signs or symptoms until they are advanced and hard to treat. They include cancers of the vulva, vagina, penis, and anus, as well as cancers in the back of the throat, including the base of the tongue and tonsils.

## Does HPV Cause Cancer?

HPV can cause cancer, but it often takes years, sometimes even decades, to develop after a person gets HPV. The CDC states there is no way to know which people who get HPV will develop cancer.

## Prevention

As with most STI's, prevention includes:

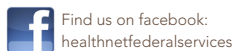
- Abstaining from sex.
- Using a condom every time you have sex.
- Having sex with someone who only has sex with you.

Vaccines are now available to protect against the most common types of HPV that can cause cancer. The CDC recommends the HPV vaccine for those aged 9 through 26 who didn't start or finish the HPV vaccine series. Some adults over age 26 may decide to get the HPV vaccine after talking with their doctor about their risk for new HPV infections and the possible benefit of vaccination. HPV vaccination in this age range provides less benefit.



If you have questions about HPV or HPV vaccines, talk with your doctor. More information is available on CDC's website at [www.cdc.gov/hpv](http://www.cdc.gov/hpv).

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