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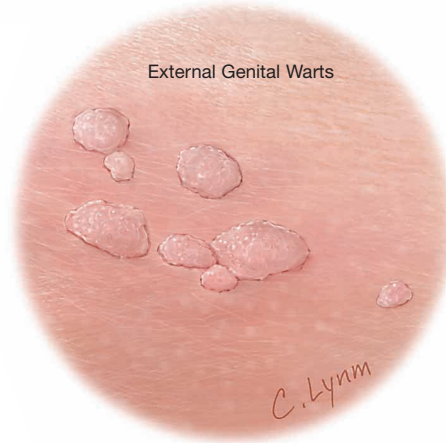
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# Papillomavirus

**H**uman papillomavirus (HPV) is the name for a group of viruses that occur in both men and women and cause **papillomas**—flat growths often called warts. The HPVs that cause the common warts that grow on hands and feet are different from those that cause warts in the genital or anal areas. Those HPVs are commonly transmitted through sexual contact and can infect people without causing visible warts or noticeable symptoms. Some types of HPVs may play a role in cancers of the anus, vagina, and penis. Certain types definitely increase the risk for cancer of the **cervix** (the lower part of the **uterus** [womb]). The HPV types that cause external warts on the genital or anal areas do not cause cancer.

A test that detects HPV and determines which types are present is available. The May 8, 2002, issue of *JAMA* contains an article about the use of HPV testing to screen for cancer of the cervix.



## RISK FACTORS FOR HPV INFECTION

HPV is one of the most common sexually transmitted diseases in the United States and is very contagious. It is most commonly spread through sexual contact with infected partners. Risk factors for HPV infection include

- Having many sexual partners
- Having sex early (before age 16)
- Using tobacco
- Having other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)
- Having an impaired immune system because of medical treatment, AIDS, or other conditions

## HPV AND CANCER OF THE CERVIX

Most cases of cancer of the cervix are related to HPV infection. Screening for cancer of the cervix is important because it allows early detection and treatment before the cancer spreads. All sexually active women or all women over the age of 18 (whichever comes first) should have regular gynecologic exams including a **Pap test**, a test in which cells in and around the cervix are examined to detect abnormalities. It is now also possible to test these cells for HPV.

## PREVENTING HPV INFECTION

Using condoms may help prevent transmission of HPV, and mutual monogamy (having sex with only one partner) is also a good prevention method. Of course, abstinence from sexual contact prevents sexual transmission.

There is no cure for HPV, but the warts can often be treated with various medical procedures. People who have HPV should inform partners before having sex and should not have sex when warts are present.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Cancer Institute  
800/422-6237  
[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
800/227-8922 (National STD hotline)  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

## INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on *JAMA's* Web site at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com). A Patient Page on cervical cancer was published in the February 23, 2000, issue; one on Pap tests in the May 5, 1999, issue; and one on sexually transmitted diseases in the January 3, 2001, issue.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mayo Clinic, National Cancer Institute

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