

# HPV Awareness

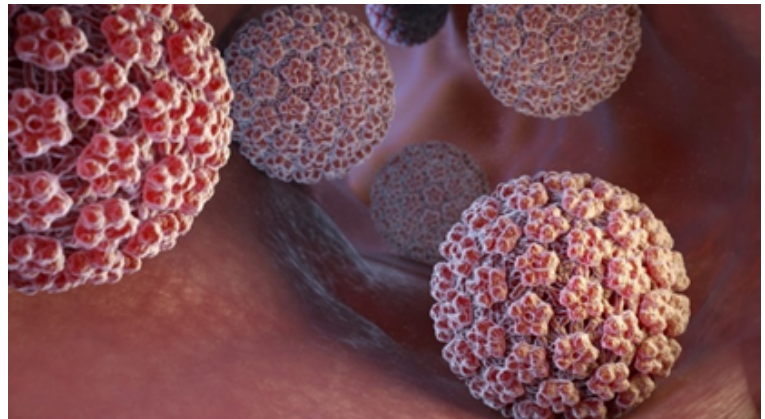


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Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a common viral infection that typically leads to skin or mucous membrane growths, known as warts. There are over 100 different types of HPV. While some HPV infections result in warts, others can lead to various types of cancer. Most HPV infections are benign and do not cause cancer. However, certain strains of genital HPV can cause cancer of the cervix — the lower part of the uterus that connects to the vagina. HPV infection has also been linked to malignancies of the anus, penis, vagina, vulva, and the back of the throat. These infections are often transmitted sexually or through skin-to-skin contact. Fortunately, vaccines are available to protect against the HPV types most likely to cause genital warts or cervical cancer.

In many cases, the immune system clears HPV infections before they cause warts. When warts do appear, their characteristics depend on the HPV type involved:

- Genital warts: These may appear as flat lesions, small cauliflower-like bumps, or tiny stem-like protrusions. In women, genital warts often form on the vulva but can also appear near the anus, on the cervix, or inside the vagina. In men, they typically occur on the penis, scrotum, or around the anus. While genital warts rarely cause pain, they may itch or feel irritated.
- Common warts: These resemble rough, raised bumps and usually appear on the hands and fingers. While generally harmless, they can be unsightly and may cause discomfort or bleeding.
- Plantar warts: Hard, grainy growths that develop on the heels or balls of the feet. They can be painful when walking or standing.
- Flat warts: Smooth, slightly elevated lesions that can appear anywhere but are more common on children's faces, men's beard areas, and women's legs.



HPV infections often affect the mouth, throat, and genital areas and are easily transmitted through:

- Skin-to-skin contact in the genital area
- Vaginal, anal, or oral sex
- Sharing sex toys

HPV infections typically cause no symptoms, so many individuals may be unaware they are infected. It is a very common virus, with most people contracting some form of it during their lifetime. While the majority of cervical cancers are caused by HPV, the development of cervical cancer can take 20 years or longer after the initial infection. Vaccination is a critical defense against HPV and the related risk of cervical cancer.

## **Importance of Screening**

Early-stage cervical cancer often presents no symptoms. Regular screening is essential to detect precancerous changes in the cervix that could lead to cancer. Current guidelines recommend:

- Women aged 21-29: A Pap test every three years.
- Women aged 30-65: A Pap test every three years, or a combination of a Pap test and an HPV DNA test every five years.
- Women over 65: Testing may be discontinued after three consecutive normal Pap tests or two negative HPV DNA and Pap tests with no abnormal results.

HPV awareness and proactive healthcare measures, such as vaccination and routine screening, are essential in preventing HPV-related health issues. By taking these steps, individuals can significantly reduce their risk of developing complications associated with HPV.

## **References**

1. NHS (2022) Human papillomavirus (HPV), NHS. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/human-papilloma-virus-hpv/>.
2. HPV Awareness (no date) www.acog.org. Available at: <https://www.acog.org/education-and-events/awareness-and-observances/hpv-awareness>.