

Human Papillomavirus and Genital Warts

What is it?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is one of the most common causes of sexually transmitted disease (STD) in the world.

Genital warts are caused by only a few of the many types of HPV. Other common types of HPV infections, such as those that cause warts on the hands and soles of the feet, do not cause genital warts. Genital warts are spread by sexual contact with an infected partner and are very contagious.

In women, the warts occur on the outside and inside of the vagina, on the cervix (the opening to the uterus), or around the anus. In men, genital warts are less common. If present, they are seen on the tip of the penis; however, they may also be found on the shaft of the penis, on the scrotum, or around the anus.

HPV can cause cells to grow abnormally on the cervix. This is called dysplasia. Dysplasia is much more common in women who have damaged immune systems due to HIV. It is important for HIV-positive women to have a Pap smear every year to look for these abnormal cells. If they are found, your doctor will want to examine you regularly to make sure they don't become cancerous.

The only way to prevent HPV infection is to avoid direct contact with the virus, which is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact. If warts are visible in the genital area, sexual contact should be avoided until the warts are treated. Using a latex condom during sexual intercourse may provide some protection.

How is it treated?

Depending on factors such as their size and location, genital warts are treated in several ways. Although treatments can eliminate the warts, none eradicate the virus completely and warts often reappear after treatment.

A doctor usually applies treatments directly to the warts. There are three treatments recommended by the HIV/AIDS Policy Guideline:

Cryotherapy: A doctor can apply liquid nitrogen to the warts to freeze them. This causes the warts to die and fall off and allows healthy skin to form.

Podophylin: A doctor can apply this powerful medicated liquid to the warts. After it is applied, it must be allowed to dry completely. This treatment should not be used in women who are pregnant. It can damage the developing baby.

TCA or BCA: These are two types of acids that can be applied directly to the warts by a doctor. It might be necessary to return to the doctor on a weekly basis to receive additional treatment.