

Human papillomavirus (HPV)

Fact sheet

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a very common virus spread through skin-to-skin contact that can affect different parts of the body. There are different types of HPV. Some types have no visible symptoms or may only cause warts. Some types are 'high-risk' and can sometimes cause serious illness, including certain cancers if left untreated.

The HPV vaccine is highly effective at preventing HPV-related illnesses and is free for all people aged 9 to 25 years through the [National Immunisation Program](#).

What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus that can affect different parts of the body. HPV spreads through skin-to-skin contact with someone who has the virus.

There are different types of HPV. Some types have no visible symptoms or may only cause warts. Other types can cause cancer, especially those that are spread during vaginal, oral, or anal sex.

What are the symptoms of HPV? What diseases does HPV cause?

Not all types of HPV will cause visible symptoms. Many people with HPV infection will not be aware of it.

Some HPV types can cause warts on any part of the body. This includes the genital area (vulva, vagina, cervix, penis, scrotum, anus, and perineum). Warts are usually painless, but sometimes cause itching or discomfort. The types of HPV that cause warts are called 'low-risk' because they are not linked to cancer.

Other HPV types are called 'high-risk' because they can cause pre-cancerous cells to grow. These cells may turn into cancer if left untreated.

High-risk HPV is responsible for 5% of all cancers worldwide, including:

- almost all cases of cervical cancer
- 90% of anal cancers
- 78% of vaginal cancers
- 60% of oropharyngeal cancers (cancers of the back of the throat, tongue, and tonsils)
- 25% of vulva cancers
- 50% of penile cancers.

How is HPV spread?

Most HPV types are spread through skin-to-skin contact with someone who has the virus, even if the person has no symptoms. The types of HPV that cause cancer are commonly spread during vaginal, oral, or anal sex. HPV can also be passed from mother to baby during birth.

Who is at risk of getting HPV?

HPV is very common and can affect anyone. The types of HPV that cause genital warts, or cancer, affect people who have been sexually active. People can get HPV soon after sexual activity starts.

How is HPV diagnosed?

A doctor can diagnose HPV infection by doing an examination or specific tests.

High-risk HPV infections of the cervix can be found using a cervical screening test. This test involves a doctor or a nurse taking a swab of the cervix. The sample can also be self-collected. The cervical screening test is strongly recommended as a regular test for people who have a cervix and have ever been sexually active.

Read more information on [cervical screening](#).

How is HPV treated?

Most HPV infections will be cleared from the body by the immune system within 1 to 2 years.

Warts can be treated using cryotherapy ('freezing off' warts with liquid nitrogen), applying prescription creams, or with laser treatments.

If a high-risk HPV type is detected during a cervical screening test, the cervical cells will need to be tested. If cancer or pre-cancerous cells are found, these can be treated by a specialist doctor.

How is HPV prevented?

Condoms can prevent some infections. However, because condoms don't cover all genital skin exposed during sexual contact, they cannot prevent all infections.

HPV vaccine protects against the HPV types that cause most genital warts, 90% of cervical cancers, and 95% of other HPV-related cancers.

HPV vaccination is recommended for all people aged 9 to 25 years.

HPV vaccination is free for people aged 12-13 years through the School Vaccination Program. Read more on the [School Vaccination Program](#) and [human papillomavirus \(HPV\) vaccine](#). It is best for young people to be vaccinated because this is when they are least likely to have HPV and have the strongest immune response to the vaccine.

Young people who miss the HPV vaccination at school can get a free vaccine up to the age of 26 years through a doctor or pharmacist. People who are older than 26 years and would like to be vaccinated against HPV should discuss this with their doctor.

In Australia, the HPV vaccine became available to females in 2007 and males in 2013. Since then, rates of genital warts have declined by more than 90% in vaccinated young people. There has also been a significant decrease in the number of people with pre-cancerous growths and cervical cancer.