

HPV is short for human papillomavirus.

HPV is a group of more than 150 related viruses. Each HPV virus in this large group is given a number which is called its HPV type. HPV is named for the warts (papillomas) some HPV types can cause. Some other HPV types can lead to cancer. Men and women can get cancer of mouth/throat, and anus/rectum caused by HPV infections. Men can also get penile HPV cancer. In women, HPV infection can also cause cervical, vaginal, and vulvar HPV cancers. But there are vaccines that can prevent infection with the types of HPV that most commonly cause cancer.

How do people get HPV?

HPV is transmitted through intimate skin-to-skin contact. You can get HPV by having vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who has the virus. It is most commonly spread during vaginal or anal sex. HPV is so common that nearly all men and women get it at some point in their lives. HPV can be passed even when an infected person has no signs or symptoms. You can develop symptoms years after being infected, making it hard to know when you first became infected.

In most cases, HPV goes away on its own and does not cause any health problems. But when HPV does not go away, it can cause health problems like genital warts and cancer.

Genital warts 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. A healthcare provider can usually diagnose warts by looking at the genital area.

HPV cancers include cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, penis, or anus. HPV infection can also cause cancer in the back of the throat, including the base of the tongue and tonsils.