

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](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/https://www.health.gov.au/topics/immunisation/when-to-get-vaccinated/national-immunisation-program-schedule) [https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/https://www.health.gov.au/topics/immunisation/when-to-get-vaccinated/national-immunisation-program-schedule].

What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) can affect different parts of the body. There are more than 100 types of HPV and around 40 that can affect the genital area. It is a common sexually transmitted infection.

Some types of HPV can cause:

- genital warts (classified as 'low risk' HPV infection)
- abnormal cells that can cause cancers of the cervix, vulva, vagina, penis, anus, mouth and throat (classified as 'high risk' HPV infection)

The HPV vaccine is highly effective at preventing HPV infection.

How does HPV spread?

HPV is spread through skin-to-skin contact with someone who has the virus, usually through vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

People with HPV often have no symptoms and they can pass it to others without knowing. This makes it easy for genital HPV to spread among sexually active people.

It is not known how long someone with HPV infection remains infectious or can pass on the virus to a sexual partner.

HPV can also be passed from mother to child during childbirth.

What are the symptoms of HPV?

Symptoms may include:

- lumps, pain or itching in the genital or anal area
- unusual vaginal or anal bleeding.

Who is most at risk of HPV?

All sexually active people are at risk of exposure to HPV.

The risk of contracting HPV is much lower in people who have been vaccinated against HPV.

How do I protect myself from HPV?

The risk of getting HPV can be reduced by:

- always using condoms for vaginal, anal and oral sex
- getting vaccinated (see 'Who should get the HPV vaccine?' section below).

Who should get the HPV vaccine?

HPV vaccination is recommended for:

- adolescents and young adults aged 9–25 years
- people with severely immunocompromising conditions
- men who have sex with men.

The HPV vaccine is most effective when given to someone before they become sexually active.

The Gardasil HPV vaccine protects against 9 strains of HPV that cause:

- over 90% of cervical cancers
- over 95% of HPV-related cancers.

The vaccine also protects against 2 types of HPV which cause 90% of genital warts. The vaccine prevents new infections with the HPV virus but does not treat existing HPV infections.

HPV vaccination is free for people aged 12-13 years through the [school vaccination program](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/immunisation/Pages/schoolvaccination.aspx) [<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/immunisation/Pages/schoolvaccination.aspx>]. Young people under 26 years of age who missed their HPV vaccination at school can get a free vaccine through a healthcare provider or pharmacist.

The HPV vaccine may be covered for International Students under [Overseas Student Health Cover](https://www.studyaustralia.gov.au/en/plan-your-move/overseas-student-health-cover-oshc) [<https://www.studyaustralia.gov.au/en/plan-your-move/overseas-student-health-cover-oshc>].

International students should contact their insurance provider and immunisation provider to discuss what costs are involved and how much is covered.

The vaccine should not be given during pregnancy but is safe while breastfeeding.

How is HPV diagnosed?

Genital warts are diagnosed by your GP or nurse through visual examination of the genital area. There is no test used to diagnose warts. However, in some cases the GP or nurse may do testing to exclude other causes of genital symptoms.

Anyone with a cervix between the ages of 25 to 74 years who has ever been sexually active can be tested for HPV as part of the National Cervical Screening Program to prevent cervical cancer. This test usually involves a GP or nurse taking a swab of the cervix. The other option is to collect your own swab. You will be given instructions about how to collect the sample by your doctor or nurse.

The sample will be sent to the laboratory and your doctor or nurse will talk to you about your results.

More information about this test can be found at [cervical screening](https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/prevention-and-screening/screening-and-early-detection/cervical-screening). [<https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/prevention-and-screening/screening-and-early-detection/cervical-screening>]

Call [healthdirect](https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/) [<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/>] (1800 022 222) to find a testing service near you.

How is HPV treated?

There is no cure for HPV infection. Most people will naturally clear the virus from the body within 1-2 years.

Warts can be treated using cryotherapy (freezing off warts with liquid nitrogen), applying prescription medication, laser treatments or, for more persistent cases, surgical removal.

If a high-risk HPV type is detected during a cervical screening test, additional testing and treatment by a specialist healthcare provider may be required.

Further information

- [HPV vaccine – parent information](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/immunisation/Pages/parent-info-hpv.aspx) [<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/immunisation/Pages/parent-info-hpv.aspx>]
- [School vaccination program](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/immunisation/Pages/schoolvaccination.aspx) [<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/immunisation/Pages/schoolvaccination.aspx>]
- [HPV and cervical cancer](https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/prevention-and-screening/screening-and-early-detection/cervical-screening/hpv-and-cervical-cancer) [<https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/prevention-and-screening/screening-and-early-detection/cervical-screening/hpv-and-cervical-cancer>]
- [Information for women and people with cervix who are under 25](https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/prevention-and-screening/screening-and-early-detection/cervical-screening/about-the-cervical-screening-test/information-for-women-under-25) [<https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/prevention-and-screening/screening-and-early-detection/cervical-screening/about-the-cervical-screening-test/information-for-women-under-25>]
- [Information for women and people with cervix who are 25 and over](https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/prevention-and-screening/screening-and-early-detection/cervical-screening/about-the-cervical-screening-test/faqs-about-cervical-screening-for-women-25-) [<https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/prevention-and-screening/screening-and-early-detection/cervical-screening/about-the-cervical-screening-test/faqs-about-cervical-screening-for-women-25->]

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- [Information on cervical screening self-collection](https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/prevention-and-screening/screening-and-early-detection/cervical-screening/about-the-cervical-screening-test/cervical-screening-self-collection) [https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/prevention-and-screening/screening-and-early-detection/cervical-screening/about-the-cervical-screening-test/cervical-screening-self-collection]
- [Cancer Institute NSW – where can I get a Cervical screening test](https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/prevention-and-screening/screening-and-early-detection/cervical-screening/about-the-cervical-screening-test/where-can-i-get-a-cervical-screening-test) [https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/prevention-and-screening/screening-and-early-detection/cervical-screening/about-the-cervical-screening-test/where-can-i-get-a-cervical-screening-test]
- [Sexual Health Infolink \(SHIL\)](https://www.shil.nsw.gov.au/) [https://www.shil.nsw.gov.au/] for free and confidential sexual health support including a confidential telephone help line available to the public Monday to Friday 9am to 5:30pm by calling 1800 451 624
- [Our Mob and Cancer](https://www.ourmobandcancer.gov.au/ways-to-help-protect-against-cancer/immunisation/hpv) [https://www.ourmobandcancer.gov.au/ways-to-help-protect-against-cancer/immunisation/hpv] for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to access information about cancer, including cancer types, prevention, diagnosis, treatment and support.

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