

HPV
Frequently asked questions:

- What is HPV? HPV stands for Human Papillomavirus. It exists in dozens of different strains.
- How did I get it? It is usually felt to be sexually transmitted, but there is some evidence that it can be transmitted through the sharing of wet towels and other forms of indirect contact.
- Is this infection common? It is very common, it is thought that up to 75% of women who are sexually active have this virus at some time and that 20% of sexually active women have the virus at any one time.
- How long have I had it? There is no way to tell, it may exist in the dormant stage for years.
- How can it be detected? Most cases in women are detected through the Pap smear, but that is not 100% accurate. It is possible to have the virus and have a normal Pap smear. Cultures cannot be done for HPV. If there are visible lesions from the virus, they may be biopsied to detect it. Lesions may include abnormal areas on the cervix detected by colposcopy or warts in the genital area.
- Will I get warts if I have this virus? Some strains can lead to warts and some generally do not. Most people with abnormal pap smears do not get warts.
- Can I be treated to make the virus go away? We have treatments for what the virus does to you (for example warts and cervical dysplasia) but we do not have treatments that make the virus itself go away. We depend on your own immune system to suppress the virus.
- Will it ever go away? This is not clear. In about 90% of patients it cannot be detected after 2 years, but it is not clear whether or not it is gone or just suppressed beyond our ability to detect it.
- What are the risks of HPV infection? Most people do not have any further problems, but in some, changes called dysplasia can occur that can go on to become cancer of the cervix. Very rarely, cancer of the vulva can occur. Most of these changes take years to occur and can be detected by regular monitoring.
- Can I get the virus again? Yes. If you are exposed to a different strain, you can be infected with it even though you have built up antibodies to one strain.
- How can I prevent re-infection. Barrier methods of contraception may help, but the most important is to limit your number of partners.