

High-risk human papillomavirus genital infection

Human papillomavirus (HPV) infection is the most common sexually transmitted infection. Most sexually active men and women contract it at some point in their lives. There are over a hundred different strains of HPV and they fall into two large categories: low-risk HPVs (which cause genital warts) and high-risk HPVs. Here we will focus on the latter.

How do you catch the infection?

You catch it when you have sex with someone that has the virus, even if they don't have any symptoms.

It is difficult to know exactly when you caught an infection because the symptoms can appear years afterwards.

What are the symptoms?

Most people don't realise that they have this infection because it doesn't cause any symptoms, and the body manages to stop and eliminate the infection, even without treatment.

In 10-15% of infections, changes appear in the skin of the affected area (the cervix and anus) which require regular check-ups with a specialist. Only a small group of these cases doesn't go away and causes lesions that eventually lead to cancer. In these cases, sores can appear, which may bleed or make sex painful and cause stomach upsets, changes in bowel movements or irregular periods.

What sort of check-ups are recommended?

Women should go to the gynaecologist for a check-up and smear test every 3 years from the year of their first sexual relation up to the age of 65.

Men that have sex with other men and have a human immunodeficiency virus infection (HIV) should have anal smear tests and anoscopy.

These patients are more at risk than the rest of the population of developing serious lesions through an HPV infection. The rest of the population doesn't need to have check-ups.

If the smear tests do not indicate any alterations, you don't need more frequent check-ups or other types of screening.

What treatments are there?

There is no specific treatment for HPV. It is managed by detecting and getting rid of the lesions that it causes. If it is a high-risk HPV, you should go to the specialist for smear tests and check-ups. Sometimes it is a matter of waiting for the body to get rid of the virus; other times any sores that it has caused are burnt, while some cases may require surgery to eliminate the affected area.

Can it be prevented?

Yes, using a condom prevents 70% of infections.

There are also three vaccines that reduce infection by the highest-risk strains of HPV infection: the latest vaccine on the market provides protection from seven high-risk strains as well as the two most common low-risk strains. This vaccine is included in the children's immunisation schedule and is also subsidised for unvaccinated women with high-risk lesions and for men under the age of 26 who have risky sexual relations or are HIV+.

