



HPV, GENITAL WARTS, AND ANAL CANCER

What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a virus from the papillomavirus family that affects human skin and the membranes that line certain parts of the body, including the throat, mouth, feet, fingers, and anus. There are over 100 types of HPV. Most HPV types don't cause any symptoms in humans; however, some can cause a growth on different parts of the body. These growths are called **warts**. A few types of HPV are thought to be responsible for cervical and/or anal cancer in men, women, and transgender individuals.

What are genital warts? What are the symptoms in GMT?

- ▶ The majority of people infected with HPV are unaware, because they have no signs and symptoms, but *sometimes* HPV manifests in genital warts (cauliflower like growths around the anal or penile area).
- ▶ Genital warts grow on the skin around the genital area and anus and on the lining of the anal canal. About 40 types of HPV can affect the genital area.
- ▶ Many people worry that their genital warts will place them at risk of cancer; however, the types of HPV that cause genital warts **do not** cause cancer.

How is HPV transmitted?

- ▶ Gay men, other men who have sex with men, and transgender (GMT) individuals can get genital HPV through sexual intercourse.
- ▶ Condom use during anal, oral, or vaginal sex significantly reduces the risk of getting HPV, but it does not entirely eliminate it because body to body contact can also transmit the virus. Globally, HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI).

What are risk factor for HPV in GMT?

- ▶ **Sexual partners:** The more sexual partners people have, the greater their likelihood of getting HPV.
- ▶ **HIV status:** GMT individuals living with HIV have a greater chance of becoming infected with HPV because HIV may have weakened their immune system.
- ▶ **Smoking:** One recent study showed that cigarette smoking increases the risk of developing genital warts from an HPV infection.¹

What about anal cancer in GMT? Are there symptoms?

- ▶ Only a few types of HPV can cause anal cancer. However, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM) are 17 times more likely to get anal cancer than heterosexual men.^{2,3}
- ▶ Symptoms that you are infected with a strain of HPV that causes anal cancer can include: abnormal discharge from the anus, bleeding from the rectum and anus, anal itching, pain or pressure around the anus, anal sores that do not heal, and changes in bowel habits or the shape of your stool. However, these symptoms can also be caused by several other STIs. The best advice is to seek medical treatment as soon as possible if any of these symptoms occur.
- ▶ To date, there is very little data on the rates of HPV and anal cancer among transgender individuals. The GMT Initiative is currently supporting two studies of STIs among transgender individuals in Thailand and the Dominican Republic; however, the lack of data is very troubling.

What precautions can GMT take against cancer-causing HPV?

- ▶ **Screening:** A growing number of physicians and health activists now believe that routine screening using an anal Pap smear helps reduce the likelihood of anal cancer. GMT living with HIV should get an anal cancer screening every one to two years. GMT not living with HIV should be screened every three years.
- ▶ **ARV treatment:** Effective HIV treatment reduces HIV-positive GMT's risk of getting anal or cervical cancer.
- ▶ **Vaccine:** A safe and effective vaccine for HPV (Gardasil®) can protect boys and men against the HPV types that cause most genital warts and anal cancers. It is given in three shots over six months.
- ▶ **Condoms:** Using a condom from the start to finish of every sex act lowers your chances of passing HPV to a partner or developing HPV-related diseases. But HPV can infect areas that are not covered by a condom—so condoms may not fully protect against HPV.

How are warts and cancers caused by HPV treated?

- ▶ **Genital warts** can be treated through surgery or frozen off. Some of these treatments involve a visit to a physician. Others can be done at home by the patients themselves. No one treatment is better than another, but warts often come back within a few months after treatment so several treatments may be needed. Treating genital warts does not necessarily lower a person's chances of passing HPV on to his or her sex partner. If warts are not treated, they may go away on their own, stay the same, or grow in size or number.
- ▶ **Anal cancer** can be treated with surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy. Often two or more of these treatments are used together. Patients should decide with their doctors which treatments are best for them.

References

- 1 Schabath MB, et al. "Smoking and human papillomavirus (HPV) infection in the HPV in Men (HIM) study." *Cancer Epidemiol Biomarkers Prev*. 2012 Jan;21(1):102-10. doi: 10.1158/1055-9965.EPI-11-0591. Epub Oct 20 2011.
- 2 U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention, Division of STD Prevention. 23 February 2011. <http://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/stdfact-hpv-and-men.htm>
- 3 U.S. National Cancer Institute. "HPV and Cancer." 15 March 2012. <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/HPV>.