



Everything You Need to Know About HPV

No fear or shame here! Just straightforward and transparent information empowering you to understand your body, explore your options, and feel confident in managing your health.

Sexual Health Education
Ages 12–18

PRESENTED BY myhealth-mylife.org

Information reviewed against CDC, WHO & NCI guidelines



"Knowledge is one of the most powerful tools you have for your health. Understanding HPV isn't about fear — it's about being informed, being proactive, and knowing you always have options and people in your corner."

13M

new HPV infections
in the US each year

9 in 10

infections clear up
on their own

15+ yrs

of vaccine safety
data behind us

VERIFIED BY:



CDC (Centers for Disease Control)



National Cancer Institute



Planned Parenthood

MyHealth-MyLife.org (MHML)

01

So... what actually is HPV?

HPV stands for **Human Papillomavirus**. It's a very common virus, in fact, it's one of the most common viruses humans can get. Most people who are sexually active will come into contact with some form of HPV in their lifetime. That might sound surprising, but it's important context: having HPV is not something to be ashamed of, and it doesn't say anything about who you are as a person.

HPV is actually a family of more than 200 related viruses. Most strains are totally harmless and cause no symptoms whatsoever. Some types can cause warts. A small number of high-risk strains, if they remain in the body for a long time without being detected, *can* increase the risk of certain cancers later in life, but this happens gradually over many years, and it is largely preventable.

The most important thing to know upfront: HPV is preventable, and there is a safe, highly effective vaccine. That's why we're having this conversation now — because getting informed early is the best protection you have.



200+ types

Over 200 strains of HPV exist. Most are harmless only a small number are considered "high-risk."



Extremely common

HPV is the most common STI in the world. It does not discriminate by age, gender, or background.



Preventable

There is a vaccine. It's been approved for over 15 years and has an excellent safety record.

02

How does HPV spread?

HPV spreads through **close skin-to-skin contact** primarily through sexual activity, including vaginal, anal, and oral sex. Unlike some other infections, HPV can be transmitted even when the person carrying it has no visible symptoms and may not even know they have it. This is actually one of the main reasons HPV is so widespread: it passes silently.

This is not a reflection of someone being careless or irresponsible. It simply means that HPV is something a lot of people can encounter, which is exactly why being informed and vaccinated matters. It's also worth knowing: you cannot get HPV from a toilet seat, sharing food, hugging, holding hands, or casual contact. It requires direct intimate contact to spread.

~80%

Of sexually active people will have at least one type of HPV at some point by the time they are 45. This number shows how common it is – not how dangerous it is.

Source: CDC / Healthline



Often invisible

Most people with HPV have zero symptoms which is why it spreads so easily and why regular checkups matter.



Not through casual contact

You cannot get HPV from sharing food, drinks, toilet seats, or hugging. It requires intimate contact.



New partners = new risk

Each new sexual partner represents potential new exposure. Using condoms reduces (but doesn't eliminate) risk.

03

What happens if someone gets HPV?

The good news — and this is genuinely good news — is that **most HPV infections cause no problems at all**. The body's immune system is usually very good at clearing the virus naturally, often within one to two years. Nine out of ten people who get HPV will have the infection go away on its own without any treatment or health consequences.

In some cases, certain low-risk types of HPV can cause **genital warts**, small bumps that can appear around the genitals or anus. These are treatable by a doctor and are not dangerous, but they should be checked out by a health professional.

In rare situations, high-risk strains of HPV can persist in the body for many years and, over time, lead to changes in cells that may develop into cancer. The cancers most associated with HPV include cervical cancer, as well as cancers of the throat, anus, penis, vagina, and vulva.

However, and this is crucial, these cancers take years to develop, are detectable early with screenings, and are largely preventable with the HPV vaccine.



9 out of 10 cases

Clear up naturally within 2 years without any treatment, leaving no lasting health effects.



Genital warts

Caused by low-risk strains.
Treatable by a doctor.
Uncomfortable but not dangerous or cancer-causing.



Long-term (rare)

High-risk strains that persist for years can raise cancer risk. Screenings catch changes early.

04

The HPV vaccine is your best protection

Here's the part that should genuinely excite you: there is a vaccine called **Gardasil-9** that protects against the nine most harmful types of HPV, including the two strains responsible for the majority of HPV-related cancers.

This vaccine has been in use for more than 15 years, with extensive safety monitoring by the CDC and FDA — and it works.

The vaccine doesn't just protect individuals — it reduces the spread of HPV across entire communities. Studies show that regions with high vaccination rates have seen significant drops in HPV-related cancers, genital warts, and cell abnormalities in young people.

The vaccine works best when given *before* any exposure to HPV, which is why it's recommended during early adolescence. This isn't about rushing growing up — it's about building the strongest possible protection while the body responds best to the vaccine.

05

Let's bust some myths 🙅

There's a lot of confusing and sometimes harmful misinformation about HPV. Here are some of the most common myths, and the actual truth behind them.

MYTH "Only girls and women need to worry about HPV."

Fact: HPV affects all genders. The CDC recommends the vaccine for boys and young men just as strongly as for girls. Males can develop genital warts and are at risk for HPV-related cancers of the throat, anus, and penis. Vaccination protects everyone.

MYTH "Getting the HPV vaccine means you're being told to have sex."

Fact: The HPV vaccine is purely a preventive health measure — no different from any other vaccination. Research has consistently shown that getting the vaccine does not change sexual behavior in teens. It simply builds protection so that, whenever you do become sexually active in life, you're already covered.

MYTH "If I have HPV, I'll definitely get cancer."

Fact: The vast majority of HPV infections clear on their own. Cancer from HPV is rare, takes many years to develop, and requires the virus to persist long-term in the body without being treated. Regular medical screenings (Pap smears, HPV tests) when you're older exist specifically to catch any concerning changes early, well before they become serious.

MYTH "Only certain 'types' of people get HPV."

Fact: HPV affects people of every background, gender identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. It's one of the most common viruses in the world. There is no "type" of person who gets it — which is also why the vaccine matters for everyone.

MYTH "If I use condoms, I'm fully protected from HPV."

Fact: Condoms significantly reduce the risk of many STIs and are an important part of sexual health. However, HPV spreads through skin-to-skin contact and can affect areas not covered by a condom. Condoms help, but the vaccine offers much stronger protection against HPV specifically.

06

Where to go if you need to get tested

First — an important note. For most teens and preteens, HPV testing is not routinely recommended because the immune system usually clears the virus on its own before it becomes a concern. Cervical cancer screening (Pap smear / HPV test) typically begins at age 21–25.

However, if you are experiencing symptoms, have concerns after sexual contact, or simply want peace of mind about your broader sexual health, **getting tested is always the right call.**

Your privacy is protected.

This is something many teens don't know: in all 50 US states and Washington D.C., minors can consent to STI testing and care without needing a parent's permission. No state requires parental consent for STI services. You have the legal right to seek confidential sexual health care.

You have the right to confidential care.

Some clinics are entirely free and will never contact your parents. The providers there are trained to work with young people in a judgment- free environment.



Your Primary Care Doctor or Pediatrician

Your regular doctor is always a safe starting point. You can ask to speak with them privately. If you're concerned about a parent seeing the bill, ask the clinic about confidential billing options before your visit.



Local Health Department Clinics

County and city health departments operate free or low-cost sexual health clinics in most areas. Services are confidential and often specifically designed for youth. Use the CDC's testing locator to find the one nearest to you.

[gettested.cdc.gov](https://www.gettested.cdc.gov)



Community Health Clinics & FQHCs

Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) across the US offer comprehensive care on a sliding-fee scale, meaning you pay based on what you can afford. Many offer free care to youth. They are required to serve everyone regardless of ability to pay.

[findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov](https://www.findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov)



Planned Parenthood

Planned Parenthood health centers across the US offer confidential, judgment-free sexual health services including HPV/Pap tests, STI testing, and vaccinations. Many people qualify for free or low-cost care regardless of insurance status.

[plannedparenthood.org](https://www.plannedparenthood.org)



School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs)

Many middle and high schools have on-site health centers that offer confidential reproductive health care, STI testing, and HPV vaccination referrals. Check with your school nurse or student services office to find out what's available at yours.



Not Sure? Call the CDC Hotline

If you're unsure where to start or want to talk to someone confidentially before going anywhere, you can call the CDC's information line. They can help direct you to free, local testing services.



1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)
Free, confidential

Confused or worried? Here's who to talk to

It's completely normal to feel confused, worried, or even embarrassed after learning about HPV — or after any sexual health concern. But you don't have to figure it out alone. There are real people and organizations that exist specifically to support young people like you without judgment, without shame, and often for free.



A Doctor or Nurse

Healthcare providers are required to keep your visits private. Ask to speak with them one-on-one.



Your School Nurse

School health staff are often a great, private first step — they know what local resources are available.



A Trusted Adult

A parent, older sibling, aunt, uncle, or family friend you trust can walk this with you.

Know Your Rights

All 50 US states allow minors to consent to STI testing without parental permission. The healthcare provider is legally required to keep your visit confidential unless there is an immediate safety concern.

If you are on a parent's health insurance plan, be aware that some insurers automatically send an "Explanation of Benefits" (EOB) to the account holder. If this is a concern; ask the clinic if they offer **confidential billing** or can see you at no cost (many free clinics do not bill insurance at all).

You can also learn more about your health rights as a teen at teenhealthlaw.org or yourhealthyourrights.org.



Support Hotlines & Organizations for Teens

CDC

CDC Testing Locator & Info Line

Find free and low-cost confidential STI testing near you, or call for information about HPV, vaccines, and sexual health.

 gettested.cdc.gov

 [1-800-CDC-INFO](tel:1-800-CDC-INFO)

PLANNED PARENTHOOD

Sexual Health Info & Care

Clinics across the US offering confidential, judgment-free care. Online chat available for private questions.

 plannedparenthood.org/teens

 [1-800-230-PLAN](tel:1-800-230-PLAN)

SEX ETC.

Teen Sexual Health By Teens

A website built specifically for teens with accurate, honest sexual health information, forums, and resources.

 sexetc.org

SCARLETEEN

Comprehensive Sex Education

One of the most trusted youth sex ed resources online covers HPV, relationships, consent, and everything in between.

 scarleteen.com

LOVE IS RESPECT

Healthy Relationships & Support

24/7 support for teens navigating relationships, sexual health concerns, or difficult conversations with partners.

 loveisrespect.org

 **1-866-331-9474**

 **Text LOVEIS to 22522**

RAINN

National Sexual Assault Hotline

If you have experienced sexual contact you didn't consent to, trained counselors are available 24/7 to support you and connect you with local care.

 rainn.org

 **1-800-656-HOPE (4673)**

BOYS TOWN

Your Life, Your Voice Hotline

A toll-free line for teens and young adults facing any challenge — including health concerns, confusing relationships, or feeling overwhelmed.

 **1-800-448-3000**

 **Text, chat, or email available**

TREVOR PROJECT

Support for LGBTQ+ Youth

Confidential support for LGBTQ+ young people navigating sexual health, identity, and mental wellness — without judgment.

 thetrevorproject.org

 **1-866-488-7386**

08

A global picture — especially for our African communities 🌍

HPV is a global health challenge, and access to information is power.

Cervical cancer —most commonly caused by HPV — claims the lives of over 340,000 women globally every year, making it the 4th most common cancer among women worldwide. What is especially heartbreaking is that approximately 90% of these deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where access to vaccination programs and screening services is limited.

For our communities in Africa and the African diaspora, talking openly about HPV is an act of care. The knowledge gap around HPV is larger in Black and African communities not because people care less, but because systems have historically provided less access and education. Sharing what you know with a cousin, a sibling, a friend, or a parent can save a life.

The WHO's Cervical Cancer Elimination Initiative calls for vaccinating 90% of girls worldwide by age 15. Countries across Africa — including Zimbabwe, Senegal, Tanzania, and Nigeria are implementing national HPV vaccination programs. If you or someone you know is connected to communities in Africa, encouraging vaccination and regular screenings is one of the most meaningful things you can do.

No matter where you are in the world, the core message is the same: get vaccinated if you can, get checked if you need to, and talk about it openly.

Silence is what allows preventable disease to spread.

Your action plan — start here

You've just equipped yourself with real knowledge.
Here's what to do with it:



Get the vaccine

If you haven't gotten the HPV vaccine, talk to your doctor or school nurse. It's covered at no cost under many programs including VFC.



Schedule a checkup

Regular health check-ins — even when nothing is wrong — are how you stay on top of your well-being.



Share the knowledge

Tell a friend or sibling something you learned today. Reducing stigma starts one conversation at a time.



Ask questions

If you're confused or worried about anything — ask a doctor, school nurse, or trusted adult. No question is too small or embarrassing.

You're not in this alone

Whether you have questions, concerns, or just want to understand your health better, there are real people who care and want to support you. Your health matters. *You* matter.



Because knowing better is the first step to living better.

MyHealthMyLife provides culturally grounded, evidence-based health education for youth, women, and families in the United States and across Africa. We don't wait for crisis. We build knowledge before it's needed.

Sexual health education for youth, women, and families across the United States and Africa. Information sourced from: CDC.gov · WHO.int · National Cancer Institute · Planned Parenthood. Content current as of 2025–2026. Last reviewed April 2026. For the most up-to-date recommendations, visit cdc.gov/hpv.

Visit our website: MyHealth-MyLife.org



Disclaimer: This article is for educational purposes only and does not replace professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always consult a qualified healthcare provider with any questions you may have regarding your health or a medical condition. Information in this article has been cross-referenced with the CDC, WHO, National Cancer Institute, and Planned Parenthood guidelines as of 2025–2026.