

## **Genital Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Infection and Genital Warts** (Modified from revised Canadian STI Treatment Guidelines 2008)

### **General Information:**

- Genital HPV is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections affecting sexually active people.
- There are about 140 HPV types, 100 of those cause minimal symptoms such as warts on the hands/feet or other parts of the body or may cause no symptoms at all.
- 40 HPV types affect the genital area.
  - 25–27 out of 40 HPV types are **low risk HPV** which can cause either external genital warts or non-cancerous changes to the cervix in sexually active females.
  - 13-15 out of 40 HPV types are **high risk HPV** and may cause to abnormal cell changes in men and women; particularly cancer of the cervix in women.

### **Natural History of Genital Warts:**

- A **low risk HPV** infection is usually not a serious or long term health concern and **does not cause cancer**.
- Genital warts are almost always spread to others through direct, genital, skin to skin contact.
- >80% of people with a genital HPV infection will clear the virus within 2 years.
- 70% of the adult population will have at least one genital HPV infection in their lifetime but may not have any noticeable symptoms.
- Canadian HPV studies show HPV infections are common and present differently between populations.
- 29% of women between 15 to 29 years of age have the highest rate of HPV infections.
- The time from contact to genital HPV and the genital wart(s) appearing, can take 1 to 8 months or longer. This means it almost impossible to know from whom or when the HPV infection was acquired.
- It is not uncommon for warts to reappear a few months after the treatment(s) are finished. Sometimes the HPV infection may still be present on or under the skin even though it is not visible to the eye. This is called an unresolved HPV infection not a new infection.

### **Partner Information:**

- The length of time genital warts can last and the risk of spreading them to a sexual partner is not known.
- The value of telling new sexual partners about a previous genital wart diagnosis is unclear.
- Genital warts are considered to be a minor, temporary, and treatable skin infection in healthy people.
- An honest discussion about STI's is always advised and encouraged whenever possible.

### **General HPV Treatment:**

- There is no scientific evidence to suggest one wart treatment is better than any other treatment.
- It is not known a) how a person will respond to genital wart treatment or b) if treatment will prevent the spread of HPV to a sexual partner.
- Some people choose not to treat the warts and wait for the body to clear the virus naturally.

## Genital Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Infections and Genital Warts (cont'd)

### HPV Treatment Options:

- **Clinician applied:** - Cryotherapy – Liquid nitrogen spray  
- Podophyllum 10% liquid
- **Self applied Prescriptions:**
  - Imiquimod cream - Aldara ®
  - Podofilox 0.5% liquid - Condyline ™

### Prevention Strategies:

- Having fewer sexual partners may lower the risk of getting an HPV infection.
- Not smoking may help to clear a genital wart infection and may lower the risk of developing abnormal cervical changes by improving a person's ability to fight off and clear an HPV infection.
- Studies show that condoms or barrier protection used correctly during skin to skin, genital contact **will lower the risk of spreading genital warts** to uninfected sex partners.
- Condoms do not protect 100% of the time because they do not cover the entire genital skin surface.

### HPV Vaccine:

- Recommended for **females 9 to 26 years of age**, ideally before the female becomes sexually active
- Gardasil ® - Health Canada approved vaccine, providing protection from:
  - **Low risk HPV types 6 & 11** which cause >90% of the genital wart infections
  - **High risk HPV types 16 & 18** which cause >70% of cervical cancers in women.
  - Gardasil ® vaccine – Available at any pharmacy with a doctor's prescription.
  - Total cost = Approximately \$450.00 for complete series. One vaccine x 3 @ 0, 2 and 6 months.
  - Gardasil ® vaccine will not treat pre-existing HPV infections

### Cancer and HPV:

- There is no scientific evidence showing that genital warts or their treatment(s) are linked to cancer.
- All females with a history of external genital warts and female partners of males with genital warts are advised to have yearly cervical pap screens because low risk HPV and high risk HPV can co-exist.
- Pap screens help to identify and monitor abnormal cervical changes so that follow up and/or treatment can be given as early as possible.
- **In women** - high risk HPV infections can cause abnormal cervical cells, precancerous lesions, or genital cancers of the vulva, vagina and/or anus. These cell changes can occur anywhere from 1 to 20 years.
- Women are advised to use their real name and personal health care card number for PAP screens so that the B.C. Cancer Agency can monitor cervical changes over time and connect one PAP with the next.
- **In men** - high risk HPV can cause abnormal cell changes to the penis, rectum and anus but is very rare.

### Resources:

- [www.STDResource.com](http://www.STDResource.com)
- American Social Health Association (ASHA): [www.ashastd.org](http://www.ashastd.org)
- B.C. Cancer Agency: <http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/PPI/Screening/Cervical/hpv.htm>
- The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada website: [www.HPVInfo.ca](http://www.HPVInfo.ca)
- Ask your doctor about the HPV Focal Study out of B.C. Cancer Agency; <http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/PPI/Screening/Cervical/hpvfocal/default.htm>
- Options for sexual health: [www.optionsforsexualhealth.org](http://www.optionsforsexualhealth.org) or [www.factsoflifeline.com](http://www.factsoflifeline.com)