

Everything you need to know about human papillomavirus

The figures are categorical: eight out of every ten sexually active people will get it. Papillomavirus (HPV) is not a disease nor is it associated to anything weird. Don't let them label you if you find out you have it.

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Many years ago I was detected to have **human papillomavirus** and I had to deal with countless biopsies, as well as the tremendous hassle of my parents finding out because someone from the hospital called them by mistake. Thank God for my mother (again) who grabbed me (again) and took me to the doctor". Statements like this one, expressed by Chenoa in her book *Perfect Defects* (ed. Martínez Roca), still remain an exception. The singer talks about how she felt when she had human papilloma (HPV).

And would you tell that you had it? It isn't an uncommon infection or anything suspicious at all, and not even a disease, rather a silent intruder, which despite occurring very regularly, still remains a taboo subject. Things are changing, however.

Doctor Andrés Carlos López Díaz, Head of Gynaecology and Obstetrics of Hospital Quirón in Malaga and scientific advisor for Laboratorios Procure Health, sheds light on the issue: "It is a common infection and the figures are categorical. **80% of the population either have it or will get it.** In Spain, 30-50% of women aged under 30 years old will become infected at some point, as well as almost everyone who is sexually active, irrespective of their age". If you get it, there's no need to announce it, but it does need to be handled naturally, with attempts to stop contagion. "Communicating it to your partner may be essential for avoiding new cases", says the doctor.

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Human papillomavirus: what is it?

HPV is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections. It replicates in epithelial cells (those that cover the body) and is passed on via **direct sexual contact with the skin and/or mucous membranes**. It is called a STI rather than a STD because it is not a disease, rather an asymptomatic contamination which disappears without treatment in most cases», clarifies López Díaz. In fact, it has been around for decades, but awareness has been raised because there is evidence that its development can cause malignant tumours.

This only occurs in some scenarios, however. Of the more than 100 existing strains, only 14 are high risk, with strains 16 and 18 most significant. "The figures don't appear to be very high, but the cervical cancer caused by those strains is the third most common among women. Types 6-11 are less severe, causing visible infections, called genital warts", explains Doctor María Hernández Hernández from the Hospital of Gynaecology and Obstetrics in Verona.

There are now treatments for all types of cases, whether for treating cancer or surgery for the more serious cases, solutions like Papilocare (Laboratorios Procure Health), which normalises low grade cervix lesions, and topical skin prescriptions that aim to eliminate annoying genital warts.

Vaccines

However, doctors emphasise on prevention despite the therapies. The vaccine has had a key role, having reduced contagion by 80%. It forms part of the official vaccination schedule for girls in Spain and is gradually being expanded to other groups. "The main route of transmission is **vaginal or anal intercourse**, given that digital (sex toys) or oral contact appears to be minimal –warns Doctor

Hernández—. And it is worth knowing that using a condom reduces infection very significantly despite not providing 100% protection".

In terms of risk factors, starting sexual activity at an early age, having several partners or changing them frequently, and a change to the immune system due to other infections increase the likelihood, increase the potential for lesions, and make recovery difficult. Even so, López Díaz insists that **anyone** who is sexually active can become infected» and provides a surprising piece of information: "Female smokers are at greater risk given that **the harmful substances in tobacco** reduce our ability to expel HPV unaided".

Rapid detection (made difficult by a lack of symptoms and because the virus can remain inactive for years) is another struggle. This has led to some communities starting to use a screening test for smear tests with changes, for women with lesions or those that have had a conisation (surgery to remove the damaged tissue). Those aged over 35 years old can also be included on occasion. And potentially we have to emulate Australia, where they estimate HPV will be eradicated in 2035.

How to avoid human papillomavirus

You don't have to give up having sex. Luckily, there are other ways of avoiding papilloma.

FIND OUT INFORMATION

Sexual issues need to be treated normally while applying a strict approach. Consult healthychildren.org, which includes a guideline about healthy decision making when it comes to sex. And tell your friends about it.

USE A CONDOM

If you have heard that the condom **does not provide 100% protection from infection**, it's true, because it leaves unprotected areas. However, it is worth knowing that it is the most effective barrier. It has to be put on right of course, with the rolled part on the outside. Get another one should anything go wrong when putting it on.

A VACCINE FOR EVERYONE

According to the WHO, primary prevention involves anti-HPV vaccination for girls aged 9 to 14 years old. This measure has reduced both infection and cervical and uterine cancer cases in developed countries by 80%. But that's not enough. Gynaecologists, including Doctor López Díaz, **advise vaccination for the entire population**, even after adolescence and if you have already been infected. If you have to buy it in the pharmacy, the two injections of Gardasil will cost you around € 120/dose.

CHECK-UPS

For women aged **over 30 years old**, the WHO recommends regular check-ups and rapid test treatments if positive.

Human papillomavirus in men

«The contagion is the same, but men normally eliminate the virus in a simple manner», indicates the gynaecologist Andrés Carlos López Díaz. They have been excluded from vaccination campaigns precisely because it is very uncommon for them to experience serious harm.

Currently Madrid, Asturias, Catalonia, and Navarre have extended prophylaxis to men aged under 26 years old, although only those that have sexual relationships with other men. And this is despite knowing that they are the main carriers. "We doctors recommend vaccination for boys too (who can have it, but have to pay for it) and it is likely to happen in the near future», states the expert.