

HPV and Cervical Cancer - Q & A

What is HPV?

HPV stands for human papilloma virus. There are more than 100 types of HPV. Some produce warts — plantar warts on the feet, common hand warts, genital warts, etc. About 30 types of HPV can infect the genital area — the vulva, vagina, cervix, rectum, anus, penis, or scrotum. Some types may cause changes in cells. These “high risk” types increase the risk of cervical and certain other cancers. Most types seem to have no harmful effect at all.

How many people have genital HPV infections?

Genital HPV infections are very common. Up to 20 million people in the U.S. have them but most don't know it. In fact, the lifetime cumulative risk in the general population is around 80%.

How do genital HPV infections spread?

Vaginal, anal, and oral sex play spread genital HPV infections. In rare cases, sex play without intercourse may also cause transmission of HPV, but this is not as likely. For both men and women, the virus can go undetected for a long time without causing any symptoms or problems. Evidence of HPV does not necessarily mean your current partner has been unfaithful.

How can I avoid getting a genital HPV infection?

Condoms can reduce the risk of HPV infection if they are used every time. But they are not as effective against HPV as they are against more serious infections, such as HIV, because ANY genital contact (including areas that condoms don't cover) can spread HPV.

Gardasil® is a vaccine that helps protect you against 4 types of HPV: 2 types that cause 70% of cervical cancer, and 2 more types that cause 90% of genital warts. It is best to have the Gardasil® vaccinations before sexual activity but if you are already sexually active, you may still benefit from Gardasil® because you may not have been exposed to any or all of the types of HPV Gardasil® protects against.

Does HPV cause cervical cancer?

A small number of genital HPVs is linked to cancers of the cervix, vulva, vagina, anus, and penis. Long-term HPV infections increase the risk of cervical cancer. Most women recover from HPV infections with no health problems at all. It is not known why some women develop long-term HPV infection, pre-cancerous abnormal cell changes, or cervical cancer. Most HPV infections go away by themselves within six months. Some women develop immunity — a natural protection — against different types of HPV.

How do I protect myself against cervical cancer?

Pap tests are the best protection against cervical cancer. They can find very early pre-cancerous conditions — which are easily treated. Sexually active women should get a Pap test each year. Some women may need more frequent Pap tests. Other women who are older than 30 years old may be able to

have them even less frequently. Talk with your providers about how often you should have a Pap test.

A woman can lower her risk of cervical cancer by practicing abstinence, having regular Pap tests to check for early symptoms, using condoms every time to reduce the risk of infection, and eating a diet high in beta-carotene and folic acid. Yellow and orange fruits and vegetables — mangoes, corn, squash, tomatoes — and dark-green, leafy vegetables like collard greens have lots of beta-carotene. Whole grains, beans, peanuts, and dark-green, leafy vegetables are loaded with folic acid. You can also lower your risk by avoiding cigarette smoking can double the risk of cervical cancer.

How is a Pap test obtained?

The clinician inserts a sterile metal or plastic speculum into the vagina. The speculum is opened to separate the walls of the vagina. It holds the walls apart so that the cervix can be seen. The clinician will then use a small spatula or tiny brush to gently collect a "smear" of cells from the cervix. The cells are tested for abnormalities. As the clinician removes the speculum, the vaginal walls are checked for irritation, injury, and any other problems.

What happens if I have abnormal results?

A number of different treatments may be prescribed if treatment is necessary. Be sure to complete the prescribed treatment and repeat the test as advised if noncancerous abnormalities and infections are found. If the pap is abnormal you may be advised to repeat the test or have a colposcopy and biopsy.

What is a colposcopy?

A colposcopy (a "colpo") is a special method of examining the cervix and surrounding tissue by a doctor. An instrument called a colposcope magnifies the cervix about 15 times, allowing the doctor to carefully check for abnormalities. If/when an abnormality is found, the doctor will biopsy (remove a small tissue sample) the area to improve the accuracy of the diagnosis. This procedure usually takes about 10-15 minutes. Most women describe the procedure like a sharp pinch or like a menstrual cramp. You may have light spotting after the colposcopy if a biopsy is taken. Please call the office if you need to set up an appointment for a colposcopy.

What is the treatment for HPV infection?

Treatment is available for genital warts or abnormal cell changes caused by HPV. But there is currently no treatment to *cure* HPV itself. Most types of HPV infection are harmless, do not require treatment, and go away by themselves. Remember ... most abnormalities that are detected are not cancerous. Early treatment of precancerous growths can prevent cancer from developing. Follow-up examinations are necessary if an abnormal condition is found.