



HPV, CERVICAL CANCER, AND YOU

What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a family of viruses. These viruses attack the skin on the human body. There are more than 100 different types of HPV. Some cause warts on the hands or other body parts. Some cause plantar warts on the soles of the feet. Some cause warts on the genitals—the labia or vagina and on men, the penis or scrotum. Some attack the skin on the cervix—the mouth of the uterus.

Does HPV Cause Cancer?

HPV on the hands and feet does not cause cancer. HPV on the cervix injures the cells on the surface of the cervix. Usually, a woman's immune system fights off the HPV and heals the injured cells. If your immune system cannot fight off the HPV, more and more cells may be injured. Over a period of years, the injured cells of the cervix may become cancerous. Almost all cases of cervical cancer are caused by HPV.

How Do You Get HPV?

You get HPV by having body contact with someone else who has HPV. HPV is very common. Getting HPV is like getting a cold. If you kiss someone who has a cold, you will probably get the cold. If you have sex with someone who has HPV on their genitals, you will probably get HPV on your genitals or on your cervix. You probably do not know anyone who has never had a cold. We now know that just about everyone who has ever had sex has had HPV.

How Do You Get Rid of HPV?

The best way to get rid of HPV on any part of the body is for your immune system to fight it off. You can help your immune system do this by taking good care of yourself. Eat well. Get enough sleep. Exercise. And most importantly, stop smoking. Smoking is the number one risk factor for not being able to fight off HPV.

How Would I Know if I Have HPV On My Cervix?

The Pap test is a test for changes in the cells of the cervix caused by HPV. New tests done on the cells collected for the Pap test can tell if you have HPV and if it is the kind of HPV that is likely to lead to cancer.

If I Have HPV On My Cervix, Do I Have Cancer?

Having HPV on your cervix does not mean you have cancer or that you will definitely get cancer. There are more than 30 types of HPV that can attack the cells of the cervix. About half of these may lead to cancer, and they are called "high-risk" HPV types. "High-risk" HPV on the cervix takes many years to cause cancer. When caught early and treated, HPV changes on the cervix do not become cancer.

If I Have HPV On My Cervix, What Should Be Done?

If you do have a "high-risk" type of HPV on your cervix, your health care provider may examine your cervix with colposcopy. A colposcope is a microscope that makes the cells look very big so your provider can see which cells on your cervix have been injured. Your provider may follow-up with more frequent Pap tests, or may take a sample of the abnormal cells to examine further. If the abnormal cells are worrisome, your health care provider may freeze (cryotherapy) or cut (LEEP) the injured cells off your cervix.

I've Heard That You Can Get A Shot To Prevent Cancer of the Cervix. Is That True?

There is a new vaccine that can keep you from getting four types of HPV. The vaccine is given in 3 doses (3 shots). See the other side of this handout for help in deciding if you should have the HPV vaccine.

Should I Get the HPV Vaccine?

Here are some things to consider when deciding to get the HPV vaccine:

- **What the vaccine does:**

The vaccine that is available now protects against four types of HPV. The vaccine protects against two of the HPV types that cause most cases of warts on the genitals. The vaccine also protects against two of the types of HPV that cause most cases of cervical cancer.

- **What the vaccine does *not* do:**

The vaccine *does not give full protection from cancer of the cervix*. There are more than 30 types of HPV that can attack the genitals and cervix, and the vaccine only protects against four of these. The vaccine does not protect against most types of HPV.

- **Your sexual history:**

If you have never had sex with anyone, you have never had HPV on your cervix. The vaccine will protect you from four types of HPV. If you have had more than one sexual partner, the chances are good that you have one or more types of HPV. Your body has already learned how to handle these types and is immune to them. If the type(s) you have are the types the vaccine prevents, the vaccine will not give you any added protection. The vaccine is likely to be much more helpful to someone who has had no or limited sexual experience.

- **Your current and future sexual activity:**

If you are just beginning to be sexually active, you will probably want as much protection as you can get from HPV and other sexually transmitted infections. The vaccine may be a good choice for you. If you have settled into a life-long sexual relationship (and your partner has too!), you will not be exposed to new types of HPV. If you have had three normal Pap tests in a row while in your current relationship, the vaccine will not add more protection. However, if you have sex with someone new or find that your partner has other partners, you may want to consider the protection of the vaccine.

- **Tobacco use:**

If you are a smoker—stop. Stopping smoking will do more to protect your health than getting the vaccine. It will also save you money!

- **Pap testing:**

Even if you decide to get the vaccine, remember that you still need to get Pap tests. Because the vaccine only protects against four of the 30 types of HPV that can attack your genitals and cervix, you are still at risk for HPV and cancer of the cervix! By getting regular Pap testing and any recommended follow-up treatments, you can get almost 100% protection from cancer of the cervix.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Cancer Institute

www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/HPV

This Web site describes the HPV virus and reviews all the different types of abnormal cells that can be found on your cervix
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov/STD/HPV/STDFact-HPV.htm

This Web site has information about HPV and cervical cancer. The information is available in Spanish

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