

HPV infection and cervical cancer: Protect yourself

Genital HPV infection is a sexually transmitted disease caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV). Of the more than 100 strains or types of HPV, more than 30 are sexually transmitted. Most people who become infected with HPV do not have any symptoms and are able to fight the infection on their own. However, HPV infection can cause abnormal Pap test results and may cause Genital warts. Approximately 10 strains are considered “high-risk” and may lead to cervical cancer.

Who is at risk?

HPV infection is common. Approximately 20 million people are currently infected with HPV and 6.2 million Americans get a new genital HPV infection every year. At least 50 percent of sexually active people acquire a genital HPV infection at some point in their lives by age 50, at least 80 percent of women will have acquired genital HPV infection.

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A small number of women have persistent genital HPV infection. Persistent infection with a high-risk HPV strain is the main risk factor for cervical cancer. The American Cancer Society predicts that more than 10,000 new cases of cervical cancer will be diagnosed in the United States in 2005.

Almost 4,000 women will die from invasive cervical cancer. Most women who develop invasive cervical cancer have not had regular Pap tests, the primary cancer-screening tool for pre-cancerous changes to the cervix and cervical cancer. When found and treated early, cervical cancer often can be cured.

How can you protect yourself?

HPV is spread through genital contact. Delaying sexual contact when you are young can help you avoid HPV infection. Limiting your number of sexual partners and avoiding sexual contact with people who have had many other sexual partners also lowers your risk of exposure to HPV. Condoms cannot protect against HPV because the virus can be passed from person to person through any skin-to-skin contact with any HPV-infected area of the body such as skin of the genital or anal area not covered by the condom. Even if there are no visible warts or other symptoms, a person with HPV can still pass on the virus to another person. There is no cure for HPV infection.

Testing for HPV

Most women are diagnosed with HPV based on abnormal Pap test results. A pap test can detect pre-cancerous and cancerous cells on the cervix. Regular Pap tests and careful medical follow-up, with treatment if necessary, can help ensure that pre-cancerous changes in the cervix caused by HPV infection do not develop into life-threatening cervical cancer.

In addition to a Pap test, your doctor can test for the high risk types of HPV that are most likely to cause cervical cancer by performing the HPV DNA test. The test is similar to the Pap test in terms of how the sample is collected and, in some cases, can even be performed on the same sample. The HPV DNA test is used:

- As a screening test in combination with Pap test in women over 30 years old.
- The DNA HPV test is also used in women with abnormal cell Pap test results to find out if more testing or treatment is needed.

By using both the HPV DNA and Pap tests, the risk of not detecting abnormal cell changes until they have developed into invasive cervical cancer is extremely slim.

When a woman has HPV and a follow-up test six to twelve months after the initial screening shows the infection is persisting, she should have a more advanced exam called colposcopy to look for dysplasia or cancer. When caught in the early stages, abnormal cells can easily be eliminated with lasers or other techniques, with no need for a hysterectomy or harsh treatment such as radiation. There are no HPV tests available for men.

The future: HPV vaccination

Researchers are developing vaccines to immunize young women against HPV. To date, one vaccine protecting against one strain of HPV (HPV-16) has been shown to be effective. Clinical trials of vaccines against other strains of HPV are in progress.

For more information on HPV infection, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov/std or call (1 800 232-4636). If you do not receive regular Pap tests, schedule an appointment with your doctor. Your PCP or participating Ob/Gyn can perform this simple, life saving test.

Information courtesy of
American Cancer Society;
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