

What's new in cervical cancer screening? **Information about HPV Testing**

If you are a woman over thirty years old, in addition to doing your routine Pap test, we will do a new test for “high risk” genital HPV. The two tests together better tell us how often to screen you for cervical cancer and precancerous changes.

If both your Pap test and the HPV test are negative, we will not need to repeat these tests again for three years. It is still important for you to have a yearly Well-Woman Exam which may include a pelvic exam.

If your Pap test is normal (negative) and your HPV test is positive, you should continue annual testing and repeat both tests in one year.

If your Pap test is abnormal, further monitoring or treatment depends on your specific results. As always, we will contact you by phone with the results of your testing and remind you when you should undergo screening again.

What's the difference between the Pap test and the HPV test?

The Pap test looks for abnormal cell changes on the cervix, which are usually caused by HPV. For this reason, women with abnormal Pap tests may be told that they have HPV. The HPV test is used to find HPV on the cervix. Doctors cannot treat HPV, but they can treat the cell changes that HPV causes. That's why the Pap test is the gold standard for cervical cancer screening.

What is HPV?

HPV (human papillomavirus) or the “wart virus” is a virus that infects skin cells. There are many different types of HPV. Some types cause warts in the genital region, and some types cause warts on other parts of the body, such as the fingers. Many people infected with HPV do not know they have it because it usually has no symptoms and goes away on its own — without causing any health problems.

HPV found on the genitals usually does not infect other parts of the body. You can become infected with more than one type of HPV and having one type of HPV will not protect you against other types of HPV in the future. Genital HPV is not the same as HIV or herpes (herpes simplex virus; HSV).

There are many different types of genital HPV, which fall into two main groups. The first group can cause genital warts (“low risk” HPV types), and the second group can cause cervical cancer in women (“high risk” HPV types).

Risk of Cervical Cancer

High risk HPV types have been linked to abnormal Pap tests and can increase the risk of developing cervical cancer later in life. *Low risk* HPV types cause genital warts and may cause abnormal Pap tests, but are not associated with the development of cervical cancer later in life.

Even in women with a high risk HPV type however, only a small percent will progress to cervical cancer. Presently there is no way of predicting whether certain individuals with HPV infection will develop cancer later.

How common is genital HPV?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted disease (STD) in the United States. At least 50% of sexually active adults have been infected with a genital type of HPV at some time in their lives. HPV is easily transmitted because most people who are infected with it do not know they have it. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that approximately 20 million American men and women have genital HPV. The CDC also estimates that at least 50% of sexually active people will get genital HPV during their lifetime. In 2000, approximately 9.2 million young adults, 15 to 24 years of age, had genital HPV. More than 6 million new cases of genital HPV are diagnosed in the United States every year.

Who gets genital HPV?

People usually get exposed to the virus through skin to skin contact during sexual activity and that includes intercourse or even just touching the genitals. In rare instances, transmission of the virus may occur from nonsexual contact. However, no research shows the genital HPV is passed on by toilet seats, kissing on the mouth, hugging, or holding hands, poor personal hygiene, sharing food or utensils, or swimming in pools or hot tubs.

How long can you have HPV?

We know HPV may be found by DNA tests beginning as early as a month after a person has caught the virus from someone. The virus may then continue to be detected for 1 to 2 years. Often the virus then “disappears” and may not be detectable on subsequent DNA testing. However, it is possible that the virus will remain present forever in the genital skin at very low levels. Since the virus can be “silent” for a long time, a person can have genital HPV even if years have passed since he or she had sex.

Genital HPV and Men

It is natural for people who learn they have genital HPV to want to know who gave it to them. But there is no way to know for sure. Many men and women have HPV infection and most do not know they have it. It is usually not possible to determine who caught the virus from whom. If you have genital HPV, don't blame your current partner – or assume your partner is cheating. Genital HPV should not be seen as a sign that you or your partner is having sex outside of your relationship.

There is currently no approved HPV test for men. Persons with HPV infection are potentially infectious to their sex partners. HPV has been linked to certain health problems in men like cancer of the penis. The risk of this is very small, much smaller than the risk of cancer of the cervix in women. If your partner does not have any genital symptoms or warts, usually there is no need for him to see a health care provider.

Why Start Testing at Age 30?

Because most people will have genital HPV at some time in their lives (most often before age 30) and it usually goes away on its own, at this time routine testing for HPV begins at age 30.

Prevention

In general, we recommend that condoms be used with all new sexual partners, especially casual sexual partners. Condom use can greatly reduce the spread of genital bacterial infections like chlamydia and gonorrhea but they are less effective in preventing HPV infection. This is probably because the condom does not cover all the genital skin. HPV can also be spread through genital contact during foreplay before a condom is used. There is a new vaccine to help prevent HPV infection currently only recommended for women aged 11 to 26.

Treatment

There is no effective treatment against the virus at this time. A healthy immune system can usually fight the virus off, and in most cases the infection goes away on its own. There is some evidence that quitting the use of tobacco products can help your immune system to get rid of the virus.

Even though infection with a HPV type may increase the risk of cancer, it is important to remember that very few women actually develop serious abnormal cervical cells from HPV. Regular pap tests can detect early signs of abnormal cells and early treatment will prevent later development of actual cancer.

There *are* treatments for the health problems that genital HPV can cause, such as genital warts, cervical cell changes, and cervical cancer. You only need treatment for a positive high risk HPV test if you have a certain abnormal pap results or external genital warts that are causing you discomfort.

If you would like a copy of our special handout about genital HPV for men, please ask?