

## **Information about the HPV Infection and Your Pap**

### **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 often there are no visible signs of HPV infection

There are many types of HPV or “wart virus” that cause genital infection. 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.

### **How do I get it?**

Between 40 and 80% of sexually active adults have been infected with a genital type of 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.

HPV is the most common STD in the United States. 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.

### **How long will I have it?**

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 shed by the genital skin 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.

### **How about my partner?**

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. 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.

## **Risk of Cervical Cancer**

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

The HPV types that are associated with the highest risk of developing cancer later in life are HPV type 16 and HPV type 18. Other types, specifically HPV type 6 and type 11, are not associated with the later development of cervical cancer. Still others, like HPV type 31, cause a small but definite increased risk for developing 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.

## **Follow-up**

There is no effective treatment against the virus at this time. 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 someone may have an infection with an HPV type that may increase the risk of cancer, it is important to remember that very few women actually develop serious abnormal cervical cells from HPV. Regular cervical cytology (the "Pap Test") can detect early signs of abnormal cells and early treatment will prevent later development of actual cancer.

Regular pap test are important to any women's health. Pap testing should be every year beginning at age 21 or earlier if sexual activity is begun earlier. It is important to begin to get pap tests by 3 years after starting sexual activity. If a woman knows she was infected with certain high risk HPV types (for example, types 16, 18, or 31) or has a history of cervical precancer or treatment then she needs pap testing every year, at least.

## **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 and often during foreplay there can be touching of the genitals. Someday there will be a vaccine to prevent HPV infection.

## **Do I need treatment?**

Not unless you have precancer of the cervix that needs treatment or external genital warts that are causing you discomfort.