

Patient Guide:

Understanding Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

Cancer of the cervix can almost always be prevented. Early detection of cell changes of the cervix seen by the Pap smear test allows for early treatment. The Pap has helped to greatly reduce the number of cases of cervical cancer among women, saving many lives.

HPV infection is involved in causing cell changes that lead to cervical cancer. HPV is widespread, but typically harmless. However, recent studies have shown that combining the Pap with HPV testing identifies more cases of developing cervical cancer, allowing more women to get treated before it is too late.

What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus or HPV is a common infection of the skin and mucous membranes. There are many different types of HPV and many are harmless while others are more aggressive and cause cells to become unhealthy. Some women infected with higher risk or more aggressive genital HPV types can develop cervical cancer, if not treated.

How common is HPV?

Genital HPV infections are very common. It is estimated that up to 75% of adults are infected with genital HPV (Boonstra, 1994). About 8 out of every 10 adults get an HPV infection.

How do women get infected with HPV?

HPV is passed from one person to another through skin on skin contact. The contact can be vaginal, anal or oral. Condom use does not completely prevent HPV transmission.

What are the symptoms of HPV?

Unlike the common cold virus, there are usually no symptoms with an HPV infection. Genital warts may appear in some infected individuals, and can cause itching and irritation. It is estimated that about 1 out of 100 Americans has genital warts, but in most of these cases, the HPV types causing the warts are at lower risk for development of cervical cancer. Again, most of the time, HPV infections do not cause any noticeable signs to the infected person. (Women with unusual vaginal discharge or pain should consult their doctor.)

Why was I tested for HPV?

It was recently recommended by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) that all women age 30 and over have an HPV test along with their regular Pap smear to better screen for cervical cancer. Younger women who have an inconclusive Pap result may also be tested for HPV to help better manage their care.

What are the health risks associated with HPV?

In most cases of HPV infection, the body's immune system can fight off the virus. In some people, the infection does not get naturally cleared away and the infection can cause the cells of the cervix to change and grow abnormally over time. Eventually, these changed cervix cells can become cancerous. Cervical cancer screening by the Pap smear and HPV testing allows for earliest detection and treatment.

Can HPV be treated?

Most cases of HPV infection clear up without treatment, as the immune system is usually good at dealing with this type of infection. However, when higher risk HPV types are found or unhealthy cervix cell changes are seen on the Pap, your doctor may recommend treatments to rid the cervix of unhealthy cells.