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Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

Infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV) is very common in both women and men. More than 100 types of this virus have been identified. Some types of this virus are spread from person to person through sexual contact. A few types have been linked to cancer. This pamphlet explains:

- How HPV infection spreads
- The link between HPV and cancer
- How your risk can be reduced

Some types of HPV infection spread from person to person through sexual contact.

What Is HPV?

Human papillomavirus is a very common infection that can be passed from person to person. Some types of HPV are spread through sexual contact. Studies suggest that at least 3 out of every 4 people will get an HPV infection during their lifetime. Sexually transmitted HPV can spread through vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

More than 30 types of HPV can infect the genital areas of a woman or a man. Like many **sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)**, there often are no signs of genital HPV. However, a few types of HPV cause warts. Warts that grow in the genital area are called **condyloma acuminata**. These growths may appear on the outside or inside of the vagina or on the penis and can spread to nearby skin. Genital warts also can grow around the anus, on the **vulva**, or on the **cervix**. Warts often are easily treated and usually are not linked with cancer.

HPV and Cancer Risk

Some types of HPV are linked to cancer in both women and men. Certain types are known to be a major cause of cancer of the cervix. HPV also may be linked to cancer of the anus, vulva, vagina, and penis.

Pap Tests and HPV

The **Pap test** is a simple test that looks at cells taken from the cervix. The Pap test sample is sent to a lab to look for any changes in the cells.

If a Pap test finds abnormal cells, your doctor will suggest follow-up. This may include repeat Pap tests, **colposcopy**, or **biopsy**. Your doctor also may suggest an HPV test. This test sometimes can be done using a Pap test sample. A negative HPV test can help determine your risk of precancer.

Early testing and treatment, if needed, will help prevent further problems. Most women with HPV never develop cancer of the cervix.

Talk to your doctor about how often to have a Pap test. Most women should have regular Pap tests. If you have HPV, your doctor may suggest more frequent Pap tests. Cervical cancer

develops over a long period of time. HPV causes cells on or around the cervix to become abnormal. In some cases, these cells may progress to precancer (changes in the cells that may, but not always, become cancer) or cancer. Most of the time, however, abnormal cells go away without treatment. A Pap test, sometimes called cervical cytology screening, is the best way to detect cell changes that may be an early sign of precancer of the cervix.

Although certain types of HPV can cause cancer of the cervix, very few women with HPV develop this type of cancer. Cancer of the cervix can be prevented with early detection and treatment. Talk with your doctor if you think you are at risk (see box).

Diagnosis

Routine Pap tests help diagnose an HPV infection. If a Pap test shows certain abnormal cells, your doctor may suggest an HPV test.

An HPV test checks for the types of HPV that may lead to cancer. For both a Pap test and an HPV test, a swab is used to collect a sample of cells. These cells then are sent to a lab to be checked more closely.

If you are older than 30 years of age, your doctor may suggest that you have both an HPV test and a Pap test. Getting both tests at the same time makes it more likely that any abnormal cell changes will be found. If the results of both tests are normal, you may not need yearly tests.

Routine HPV testing is not recommended in women younger than 30 years of age because HPV is very common in this age group and cervical cancer is rare. In these women, having an HPV test with a Pap test might lead to unnecessary treatment.

Risk Factors for HPV

- Previously treated for cancer or precancer
- Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection
- Weakened immune system (for instance, because you have had a kidney transplant)
- Exposure to the drug diethylstilbestrol (DES) before birth
- Multiple sex partners

Prevention

Currently, there is no cure for HPV, although a vaccine is being developed. You can decrease your risk of infection by avoiding contact with the virus. To lower the chance of infection:

- Limit your number of sexual partners. The more partners you have the greater your risk of infection.
- Use condoms to reduce your risk of infection when you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Condoms also help protect against other STDs.

Condoms cannot fully protect you against HPV infection. HPV can be passed from person to person by touching infected areas not covered by a condom. These areas may include skin in the genital or anal areas. If you have HPV, take steps to protect your health and the health of your partner.

Finally . . .

Some types of HPV infection spread from person to person through sexual contact. To lower your risk of infection, limit your number of sexual partners and use condoms. If you are infected, regular Pap tests and any follow-up that your doctor recommends is the best way to prevent precancer and cancer.