

HPV & Your Positive Test

Your pap smear was normal, but you just found out that your HPV test was positive. Chances are, you might now be freaking out. Relax. The reason I've written this is to give you some information about the HPV virus, and to reassure you that you are okay. You may be inclined to search the internet for everything you can learn about HPV, and that's okay. Education is good, but you may be frightened by what you read. Please always return here and read over & over what I have to say!

What's all the fuss about HPV? HPV is the Human Papillomavirus, a viral infection that is known to be the cause of cancer and pre-cancers of the cervix. There are over 100 different strains of the virus, and those associated with pre-cancers are known as the "high risk" types. There are also "low risk" strains, which can cause a skin infection called venereal warts. We do not test for low risk strains, only high risk. We've learned a great deal about HPV, and you have probably heard about it yourself as there is now a vaccine available to women under 26 years of age.

Let's establish an important principle: HPV is a sexually transmitted infection. You got it from having sexual contact with an infected partner. This sounds terrible, but don't beat yourself up. Let's establish another important principle: 80% (8 out of 10) of us as sexually active adults will have an HPV infection at some point by the time we reach 50 years old. That's *almost everyone*. The risk factor is having had more than one sexual partner in your lifetime, or being with a partner who has had more than one sexual partner in their lifetime. Again, this is *most everybody*. HPV is what I describe as "the common cold of the vagina." You don't beat yourself up over getting a cold, do you? Probably not. Nor should you about HPV. You also need not lose sleep over it, because the fact that we identified it means that we will follow you more closely precisely so it will not cause you problems. It is not something you want to ignore. But as long as you follow up with me, HPV will be more of a nuisance to you than any particular danger. We used to believe that an HPV infection was permanent; once exposed, you have it always. We now know this is not true. 75-90% of active HPV infections will clear within a year of the initial infection. Your immune system recognizes it as an invader and makes it go away.

Recent recommendations have changed regarding how we test for HPV. The pap smear itself is a screening test for pre-cancers of the cervix (NOTE: YOU DO NOT HAVE CANCER!!) Now, it is recommended that women over 30 be tested for the virus as part of their pap smear. If the test is negative, we usually need not do an HPV test again for 3 years. HPV is much more common as a transient infection in women under 30; that is, it comes & it goes. When we find it in women over 30, we become more concerned that it may be an infection that is lingering. A lingering infection may put you at higher risk for later developing a pre-cancer of your cervix. Therefore, if the test is positive, we simply repeat a pap smear every 6 months (twice a year, instead of once a year). This way, we can find any abnormality at the earliest possible opportunity. And this is what I've recommended for you. Six months is a safe interval because the progression to outright abnormalities is very, very slow.

Does it mean your partner is cheating on you? No, it does not! You can be infected with HPV from early sexual encounters, and the virus can remain dormant. It is passed back and forth

between males & females, and there is no good, reliable test for men. You can assume that if you have tested positive for HPV that your partner has it too.

There is no treatment for HPV at present. You might have heard about the vaccine for the virus. It is absolutely recommended for women under 26, but not yet approved or covered by insurance for women older. It does not make HPV go away; only your immune system can make this happen. Rather, it can prevent you from being infected again in the future. Women who smoke are more likely to be infected with HPV and to delay clearance. This is why smokers have a higher incidence of cervical cancer. So, if you smoke, here's another good reason to stop. Taking a daily multivitamin certainly can't hurt, so I recommend this too.

In summary, your pap smear is normal, so I do not believe you have a pre-cancer of the cervix. HPV is a risk factor for developing such an abnormality later on, so as long as your test is positive (until your body clears it), we'll do a pap smear every 6 months. I hope this helps you to understand, and relieves some of your anxiety! As always, if you need to talk to me about it, please call for an appointment!

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