



HPV and Cervical Cancer

This fact sheet will help you make sense of the connection between HPV and cervical cancer and the importance of the Pap test.

What is HPV?

HPV stands for human papillomavirus. It is a very common virus. There are more than 100 types of HPV. Some of these types affect the genital area, including the cervix, vagina, vulva, anus or penis.

HPVs are the major cause of cervical cancer in women. HPV is transmitted by genital contact during sex. This includes vaginal, anal and oral sex, although it is rarely transmitted by oral sex. The virus also can be transmitted during genital-to-genital contact without intercourse.

At least 50 percent to 70 percent of sexually active men and women will be infected with HPV at some point in their lives. Both men and women can get HPV and pass it on to another person without even realizing it.

Most people with HPV don't ever know they have it. They never have symptoms or problems. Usually the body's immune system will fight off the infection and it goes away on its own.

The types of HPV that affect the genital area are divided into low-risk types and high-risk types.

Low-risk types of HPV can cause genital warts. Genital warts are single or multiple growths or bumps that appear in the genital area.

High-risk types of HPV can cause changes in the cells of the cervix that can develop into cervical cancer. Most of the time, infection with high-risk HPV types goes away without causing any problems. But sometimes, the HPV virus does not go away, and this can cause abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix. If left untreated, these abnormal changes eventually can lead to cervical cancer.

There is no treatment for HPV itself. A healthy immune system usually can fight off the virus on its own. There are treatments for the health problems caused by HPV, such as genital warts, cervical cell changes and cervical cancer.

How do I know if I have abnormal changes in my cervix?

A Pap test can detect the abnormal changes caused by HPV before they become cancer. If your Pap test shows abnormal changes, your doctor or nurse will let you know if you need any treatment. If cancer does occur, the Pap test can find it early when it is easier to treat. It is very important to get a Pap test as often as recommended by your health care provider.

The Pap test itself does not specifically test for HPV. It tests for the changes in the cells of the cervix caused by HPV.

Is there a test for HPV?

The test for HPV is called the HPV test. The HPV test is used to find HPV on the cervix.

- For women 30 or older, the HPV test can be done at the same time as the Pap test, or the Pap specimen can be tested for HPV if the Pap test is abnormal. Women 30 or older who have HPV are more likely to have had it a long time. The results of the HPV test can help the health care provider decide if further tests or treatments are necessary.
- Women younger than 30 do not need an HPV test when they have their Pap test. This is because the HPV infection is very common in this age group and usually goes away.

The HPV test also may be done if a Pap test result is unclear, meaning it is not clearly normal, but also not clearly abnormal. In this case, the age of the woman does not matter.

Women should check with their insurance company to see if it will reimburse for the HPV test.

No HPV test is currently available for men.

How do I lower my risk of getting HPV?

The surest way not to get HPV is not to have sex.

If you do decide to be sexually active:

- Make sure a condom is used during sex. This may reduce your risk of getting HPV but may not fully protect you. That is because areas not covered by a condom may have the virus.
- Have sex with only one partner who has sex only with you. The more partners you have sex with, the higher your risk of getting HPV.

Vaccines are now available for males and females ages 9 to 26 that can help protect against the two main types of HPV that cause cervical cancer. However, women who have been vaccinated still should get regular Pap tests.

Important things to remember

Most sexually active people will have genital HPV sometime in their lives.

Genital HPV usually goes away without causing any problems.

When high-risk HPV does not go away, it can cause changes in the cells of the cervix that can eventually lead to cervical cancer.

Pap tests can detect the cervical cell changes caused by HPV.

It is very important to get a Pap test as often as recommended by your health care provider.

For more information, contact the North Dakota Department of Health's Women's Way Program at 800.280.5512 or 701.328.2389.

