

## **HPV and Cervical Health**

Thirteen thousand women in the United States are diagnosed with cervical cancer every year. This is a tragedy because, in most cases, cervical cancer can be prevented through the early detection and treatment of abnormal cell changes that occur in the cervix years before cervical cancer develops. We now know that these cell changes are caused by human papillomavirus, commonly known as HPV. The traditional test for early detection has been the Pap test. Now a specific test for HPV is being offered with the Pap test in women starting at 30 years of age and in women of any age when the Pap test alone has found slightly abnormal cell changes.

### **What is the Pap test?**

The Pap test is a method of screening cervical cells. The test involves collecting a small sample of cells from the cervix with a small soft brush or spatula, usually during a routine pelvic exam. The cell sample is sent to a laboratory where it is prepared and evaluated under a microscope, and abnormal cells can be identified.

### **What is the HPV test?**

The HPV test evaluates cervical cells for the presence of many types of HPV, including the 13 types that are most commonly found in cervical cancer. If one of these 13 types is present, the test is reported to be positive for high-risk HPV. High-risk HPV can cause cell changes that are associated with the development of cervical cancer. The HPV test is done at the same time as the Pap test by using a small soft brush to collect cervical cells, or the HPV testing may be done directly from the Pap sample.

### **What is HPV?**

HPV is a very common virus. In fact, most men and women are infected with HPV at some time in their lives. There are approximately 100 types of HPV. Some HPV types only infect the genital area and may cause warts, some cause mild changes in cervical cells that do not turn into cancer, and some cause changes that may become cervical cancer if not treated. The types of HPV that are found in the genital areas are usually passed on during sexual contact (sexually transmitted). HPV types that cause warts on the hands or feet do not cause genital warts or cervical cell changes, nor do genital HPV types generally spread outside the genital area.

### **How common is HPV?**

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted virus. The estimated likelihood of getting an HPV infection sometime in a person's life is 75% or higher. This means that **anyone** who has ever had sexual relations has a high chance of being exposed to this virus, but only a small number of women infected with HPV develop cell changes that need to be treated. In most cases, the immune system will keep the virus (including the cancer-related HPV types) under control or get rid of it completely. However, if HPV infection

does not go away, there is a greater chance of developing cell changes that lead to cancer and treatment may be necessary.

### **What happens if my HPV Test shows that I have HPV?**

If you have a positive HPV test and an abnormal Pap, you will most likely be advised to undergo colposcopy. This is a procedure in which the cervix is examined using a bright light and magnification. Often biopsies (pea-sized pieces of tissue) are taken and sent to a pathology lab for examination. The biopsy is the most reliable test, and the results of the biopsy, not the Pap or the HPV test, are used in determining the appropriate treatment course.

### **Summary:**

HPV infection is common. It causes both genital warts and cervical changes that may lead to cancer. Pap smears and direct HPV testing are available to help women protect themselves against cancer.

If you have questions about this or other health-related matters, please contact your health care provider or the staff at the Student Health Center 784-6598.

Other information sites:

[www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFact-HPV.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFact-HPV.htm)

1-800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)