

HPV and ABNORMAL PAP SMEARS

Finding out you have an HPV infection or an abnormal Pap smear can be a frightening experience for many women. Because of the shame surrounding sexually transmitted diseases and fears of deadly cancers, some women panic before understanding what this diagnosis actually means. As your physicians, we would like to reassure you that this does not mean you are an “unclean” woman, that your partner has been unfaithful, or that you will get cancer and die. We have prepared some facts to help explain what your test results really indicate and what you can do to stay healthy.

What is HPV?

- Human Papillomavirus (HPV) affects both men and women. In the United States, almost **75% to 80%** of males and females will be affected in their lifetime. ***It is very common!***
- HPV can be transmitted through any kind of genital contact with someone already infected – intercourse isn’t necessary. While condoms can lower the risk of transmission, they are not 100% effective.
- Most people who have HPV don’t know because the virus often has no symptoms. That means you can have it and pass it on to your partner without knowing it.
- Most HPV infections clear on their own within 2 years. Those that don’t can ultimately result in cervical, vaginal and vulvar cancers in women and genital warts in men and women.
- There are several subtypes of HPV. Types 6 and 11 cause genital warts, while types 16 and 18 (often labeled “high risk HPV”) have been linked to cervical dysplasia (pre-cancerous lesions) which can develop into cervical cancer.
- Women who have HPV and smoke have nearly twice the risk of developing cervical dysplasia than women who do not smoke. Another good reason to quit!

When did I get HPV?

- HPV can lie dormant for many years before the appearance of a genital wart or an abnormal pap. ***A positive test does not mean you have contracted the virus recently.***
- Stress, changes in diet and other factors that may compromise your immune system can lead to an HPV flare.
- Only recently has HPV testing been included as part of annual screenings for women over 30. Women under 30 have a very small incidence of cervical cancer and are not routinely tested for HPV unless they have an abnormal pap smear. You can have normal pap results and still have HPV.

- Pap smears have a 30% false negative rate. Sometimes abnormal cells are missed in screening. It is important to have a pap every year or more frequently if recommended by your doctor.

If I have HPV will I get cervical cancer?

- Virtually all cervical cancers are caused by HPV infection. But don't panic – in only 5% to 10% of women infected with HPV is there a high risk of developing cervical dysplasia.
- Regular pap screenings allow your doctor to detect and treat pre-cancerous lesions before they progress to invasive cervical cancer.

Treatment:

- Depending on the specific results of your pap, your doctor may only recommend that you have a repeat pap smear in a few months.
- Because HPV flares are often related to stress and overall health, you may want to consult with our doctors and nutritionist on ways to keep your immune system in top form.
- Your doctor may recommend colposcopic inspection to get a better look at your cervix. During this procedure we can take a biopsy and remove any abnormal areas with a cauterizing loop (LEEP) or by freezing (cryotherapy).

Vaccination:

- The GARDASIL vaccine helps protect against 4 types of HPV. In girls and young women ages 9 to 26, GARDASIL helps protect against 2 types of HPV that cause about 75% of cervical cancer cases, and 2 more types that cause 90% of genital warts cases. In boys and young men ages 9 to 26, GARDASIL helps protect against 90% of genital warts cases. Talk to your doctor to find out if this is an option for you or your child.

If you have any additional questions or concerns, please call our office.

