

How to Guard Against Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

By Anita Del Bianco, M.D.

Q: What is Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)?

A: HPV is an extremely common virus that typically infects the male and female genital tracts. There are many types of HPV. Some types of the virus cause genital warts. Genital warts are similar to regular warts and are generally harmless and self-limited (they resolve on their own over time). Genital warts may be treated with medication by a doctor to hasten the resolution of the warts. Some other types of HPV appear to have no symptoms and simply resolve over time as well.

The concern about HPV is that some of the types (strains) cause changes in the cells of a woman's cervix. In fact, these "high risk" strains are the main cause of cervical cancer. This is especially true in women who smoke as the carcinogens (cancer-causing agents) in cigarette smoke combine with the virus to cause cell damage and eventually may cause cervical cancer.

Q: How is HPV transmitted?

A: HPV is transmitted through sexual activity. The more sexual partners a person has, the more likely it is that he/she will be infected with the virus.

Q: How easy is it to "catch" HPV?

A: VERY! Some studies show that young adults who have more than one sexual partner, have almost a 90% chance of acquiring the infection some time during their life. Condoms are fairly effective in preventing the spread of infection and should be widely used.

Q: How can HPV be prevented?

A: Monogamous relationships will decrease the chance of spreading the infection. Also, as stated above, condom use is effective in prevention and should be encouraged.

Q: What about the vaccine to prevent HPV?

A: A vaccine is currently available to decrease the transmission of 3 high risk strains of HPV. It is manufactured by Merck and marketed as Gardasil. It is recommended by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that healthy young women between the ages of 14 and 26 be vaccinated with Gardasil. Trials for women in other age groups are currently underway. The vaccine may be approved for use in women older than 26 once the trials are completed. It must first be found to

be safe and effective in other age groups. The vaccine does not prevent all strains of high risk HPV and will not prevent genital warts.

Q: What if I have already been diagnosed with HPV?

A: Further testing is necessary. Your gynecologist will most likely perform a colposcopy which is looking at your cervix with a magnifying glass. Your doctor may also take biopsies and send them to the pathologist looking for signs of pre-cancer or cancer of the cervix.

In women who have pap smears annually, cervical cancer is rarely found. That is because women who have regular care with pap smears are found earlier, before cancer has a chance to develop. Pre-cancer will be treated with further testing and close follow ups with pap smears. Once the paps come back normal for two years, annual paps may be resumed.

Q: What can I do to improve my chances of clearing the virus?

A: Most young, healthy people (approximately 80% of patients with HPV) will clear the virus on their own within the first year of diagnosis. I generally tell my patients to use condoms during this time especially. That way, they are not continually re-exposed to the virus. It is very important for smokers to stop smoking (FOREVER!) and for all patients to avoid second-hand smoke. Cigarette smoke will increase the chances that the virus will cause pre-cancer or cancer of the cervix.

Anita Del Bianco, M.D., is an obstetrician-gynecologist with Physicians' Primary Care of Southwest Florida.