

HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS (HPV)

What is Human Papillomavirus or HPV?

HPV refers to many different strains of a particular virus. There are over one hundred different strains (types) of the HPV virus. Some strains cause cervical cancer. These are referred to as "high risk strains". Some strains cause genital warts. The majority of the strains cause no identifiable problems.

How do women contract HPV?

HPV is typically a sexually transmitted infection. Women contract HPV through sexual intercourse, but they can also come in contact with HPV during oral sex or anal intercourse. Contraction of HPV through casual contact is not typical.

Which strains cause cervical cancer?

Strains 16 and 18 are the strains most often found in cervical cancer cases. Only about 13 of the over 100 strains cause cervical cancer.

How do I know if I have HPV?

Women are checked for HPV on the regular screening annual pap smear exam. Women over 30 years old should consider asking their gynecologists for "co-testing" for HPV with the annual pap smear.

If my doctor tells me that I have HPV on my pap smear, is it important to know exactly which strain of HPV I have?

No. You can be tested to find the exact strain that you have, but the treatment is not altered based on the high risk strain type.

Can HPV cause any other problems in women?

Yes. Because of the way that HPV is transmitted, HPV also contributes to head and neck cancers and anal cancer. These areas of the body also have cells that are susceptible to the carcinogenic (or cancer-causing) agent in the HPV virus.

What can I do to make HPV clear my system faster?

HPV is cleared in most healthy women by their natural immune systems within 2 years. Things that you can do to boost your immune system will generally help your body get rid of the virus faster. Condom use has been shown to decrease the time it takes to clear the virus. Folate (also known as folic acid) has also been shown to clinically clear the virus faster. I also recommend getting enough rest, exercising regularly, and taking Lysine and multivitamin supplementation to my patients with HPV. If you are a SMOKER, you must stop smoking in order to clear the virus quickly. Smoking is a major risk

factor for HPV infections causing cervical changes that progress to cervical cancer. If you need help with SMOKING CESSATION, ask your doctor to help you.

What if my doctor tells me that I have HPV?

If you have HPV, your doctor will most likely recommend that you have a follow-up test called a colposcopy. During colposcopy, your doctor will look at your cervix with a magnifying glass that is mounted on a small tower. Most of the time, your doctor will wash your cervix with vinegar first. Vinegar is a mild acid that helps the doctor see any abnormal spots that may need to be sampled.

Does colposcopy hurt?

Most patients only complain of mild discomfort during colposcopy. Taking Ibuprofen 400mg prior to the colposcopy will usually alleviate this discomfort. Your doctor will then discuss the results with you and let you know if any further treatment is recommended. Other treatment may just include repeating pap smears every 6 months for 2 years of normal paps. Less commonly, another procedure is needed to make sure that any abnormal cells are removed.

How do I prevent HPV?

Taking a vaccine that prevents HPV, like Gardasil or Cervarix decrease the risk of becoming infected with some of the main HPV strains that cause cervical cancer like 16 and 18. Limiting the number of sexual partners you have and choosing partners who limit their number of partners may decrease the chances of contracting the HPV virus. Condom use is also recommended.

In summary, it is important to remember that the vast majority of HPV infections resolve spontaneously in women. Stay as healthy as possible. Take your vitamins, get plenty of rest and follow up with your doctor as advised.