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The Link Between HPV (Human Papilloma Virus) and Cancer: What Every Woman Should Know



By Kimberly Turner, MD

It seems that every woman knows someone who has gotten a dreaded phone call or letter from their doctor about an abnormality in her annual pap test.

For most women, the cause of the abnormal pap smear is HPV (human papilloma virus). HPV is a sexually transmitted infection passed on by direct skin contact or intimate sexual contact. Other causes of abnormal pap smears that are less alarming to doctors are simple vaginal infections, not enough cells sampled during the pap smear, blood present (this is why many doctors do not do routine pap tests on women during menstruation), or even menopause.

While the presence of HPV is not cause for immediate alarm, it is important to get additional testing since some HPV infections are linked to the development of cancer (cervical, vulvar, vaginal and anal in women). There are more than 100 types of HPV at present - some are more likely to cause genital warts (fleshy growths of the genital area) which are typically visible to the naked eye, while others are more likely to cause precancerous/cancerous changes in the genital area which are typically microscopic and not visible to the naked eye.

According to the American Social Health Association, there are more than 20 mil-

lion people already infected with HPV and approximately 5.5 million new cases each year. It is estimated that more than 80% of women under 30 are currently infected with HPV. Part of the HPV epidemic is attributed to the fact that many infected people do not have symptoms. Genital warts and microscopic HPV infections are highly contagious and can be spread even with the proper use of barrier contraception. In other words, condoms do not completely protect against HPV infection or genital warts. Remember that many people who have HPV do not have symptoms so they pass it on without necessarily knowing it.

For women who have genital warts or other HPV infections, or those whose partners do, a visit to the doctor is essential. HPV typing is now available so doctors can assess your cancer risk with a simple test done during a routine pap/pelvic exam. HPV typing can be done on any woman who gets a pap smear although not all insurers are covering the cost of this test yet. A lot of media attention has been directed at HPV screening.

Commercials and ads are asking women to talk to their doctors about HPV screening. Many doctors now believe that HPV screening, in conjunction with the traditional pap smear, will further decrease new cases of some types of female genital cancers.

OPTIONS

The good news is that many cases of HPV will resolve without treatment. Other HPV cases will require the assis-

tance of a doctor to alleviate the symptoms/signs of infection. If you suspect you have HPV you should see your doctor even if the symptoms go away. Because, HPV is a sexually transmitted disease, your doctor may offer you screening for other sexually transmitted diseases including HIV.

Depending on the size and location or your HPV infection, your doctor may give medicine or he/she may recommend freezing techniques, cautery (burning with chemicals or simple office surgery), or the use of laser. Injectable medications such as interferon can also be used. Microscopic HPV infections that cause precancerous/cancerous changes are most often treated with surgery. Successful treatment of HPV infections is possible with a doctor's help. Most women who have had HPV infections or who have been treated for HPV infections will be screened with pap smears/ HPV testing more than once a year.

Even after successful treatment of genital warts/HPV, you can still be infectious to your present or future sexual partner. Honesty and open communication are best in any relationship. Researchers are currently working on HPV vaccines that may help to stop the HPV epidemic in the near future.

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