Article Series Cervical

Understanding Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

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What is Human Papillomavirus (HPV)?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common, sexually transmitted infection impacting about 13 million people in the US every year.

There are many types of HPV. Some cause no symptoms, while others may lead to genital warts or cancer. HPV is responsible for more than 90% of cervical cancer cases, with 10,800 women diagnosed annually in the US.

Who Can Get HPV?

Anyone who has sexual contact with an infected person can get HPV. The risk is higher if you:

- Are sexually active at a young age
- Have multiple sexual partners
- Have a sexual partner who has had many partners

How Does HPV Cause Cervical Cancer?

Most HPV infections do not lead to cancer, but if a high-risk HPV type stays in the body for years, it can cause cell changes in the cervix. Over time, these changes may develop into cancer if untreated.

Is There a Cure for HPV?

No, but there are treatments for conditions caused by HPV, like genital warts, changes to the cervix, and cervical cancer.

What is Cervical Cancer?

Cervical cancer occurs when cells in the cervix grow out of control. The cervix is the lower part of the uterus that connects to the vagina.

What Tests Can I Expect?

HPV testing may be a part of your cervical cancer screening. Your doctor may use one of the following to detect cervical cancer:

- **HPV test:** looks for cells infected with high-risk HPV
- **Pap test:** checks for precancerous cells and cervical cancer cells caused by HPV
- **HPV/Pap cotest:** combines both tests

If results suggest the possibility of cervical cancer, doctors may perform:

- **Colposcopy:** uses a magnifying instrument called a colposcope to look for abnormalities in the cervix
- **Biopsy:** removes a tissue sample from the cervix to check for cancer

If cervical cancer is found, further tests may help determine the stage (extent) of cancer to guide treatment.

Is Cervical Cancer Curable?

Yes, especially if found early. The 5-year relative survival rate is 67%, meaning people with cervical cancer are 67% as likely as those without it to live at least 5 years after diagnosis. If detected early, this rate increases to 91%.

How Can HPV and Cervical Cancer Be Prevented?

HPV Vaccination

The HPV vaccine is safe and can prevent over 90% of HPV-related cancers. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends:

- Routine vaccination at ages 11-12 (can start at age 9)
- Catch-up vaccination through age 26, if not previously vaccinated

The vaccine is usually not recommended after age 26 because most adults have already been exposed to HPV.

Cervical Cancer Screening

Since the HPV vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV, regular screenings are essential and recommended for :

- **Starting age 21 to 29 years:** Pap test every 3 years
- **Then, from ages 30 to 65 years:** HPV test or HPV/Pap cotest every 5 years, or Pap test every 3 years

Safe Sex Practices

Condoms can lower the risk of HPV , but don’t provide full protection since HPV can infect areas not covered by the condom.

Protect yourself from HPV and cervical cancer by getting vaccinated, staying up to date on screenings, and practicing safe sex.