



Adolescents and HPV – What Young Women Should Know

What is HPV?

HPV is human papillomavirus. It causes infections that are spread through direct skin-to-skin contact. It is best known for causing warts, but it can also cause cancer (see below). When genital skin (the skin that covers the sexual organs) is involved, the infection is called “sexually-transmitted” since you can spread this virus to your sexual partner - the same way chlamydia and gonorrhea are spread.

There are over 100 different types of HPV. Most HPV infections do not cause any health problems because the infected person’s immune system gets rid of the infection before it can do any damage. Some types of HPV are called “low risk” because they can cause minor changes like the warts that can be found on your hands or feet or on your genital area. Usually those types go away on their own and do not cause long term problems. But other HPV types are called “high risk” because they can cause infected cells to lose control of their own growth. If early changes are not found and treated, these changes can turn into cancer years later.

Why is this important for women’s health?

HPV infection is very common. When the "low risk" types of HPV infect the outer genital skin (vulva), they can cause genital warts, also known as condylomata acuminata. Genital warts generally do not cause long term health problems. But they are unsightly, uncomfortable, and very contagious to sexual partners. For those reasons, genital warts are usually treated to make them go away.

One of the other sites most often infected by HPV is the cervix. Each year about 15-20% of young women who have sex will get an HPV infection of the cervix, which is the opening to the uterus or womb.

When HPV infects the cervix, it usually does not cause a problem and just goes away when your immune system gets rid of it. Occasionally it causes harmless changes that usually also go away. But sometimes, depending on the type of HPV and the length of time of the infection, HPV can cause serious changes. These changes are called "dysplasia" and some have the potential to become precancerous. Both harmless and serious changes can be found on a Pap test. But if several years go by and the serious changes are not found and not treated, some "high-risk" HPV infections of the cervix can cause these precancerous changes to turn into cervical cancer.

How is HPV different in adolescents?

HPV infection and mild or “low-grade” Pap test abnormalities are very common in adolescents (age 20 and younger). However, adolescents who have HPV are more likely to get rid of the infection than older women are. This is why cervical cancer is very rare in the adolescent age group.

The vast majority of HPV infections in adolescents go away on their own within a couple of years, and don't cause any serious health problems. This is why many experts do not advise having a Pap test done until about 3 years after a woman's first intercourse or by age 21, whichever comes first. Letting some time pass allows the HPV infection to go away if it is going to. But if it does not go away and causes precancerous changes, finding it and treating it is very important.

Adolescents who do get a Pap test and have mild changes on their Pap, known as atypical or low-grade changes, are often watched with yearly Pap tests and do not need any other treatment.

Adolescents with severe or high-grade Pap changes may be watched more closely with a Pap test and another test called a colposcopy (looking at the cervix under magnification) every 6 months for up to two years. Often, even severe changes will go away on their own in this age group.

Older women will usually be offered treatment to remove any severely abnormal cells from their cervix. Sometimes this is also the right plan for adolescents, but usually it is safer to wait for a year or two to see if the changes will go away. If they do not go away on their own, then treatment might be a good idea.

Should adolescents get an HPV test?

HPV is so common and so unlikely to cause problems in young women that finding it is not helpful. So adolescents should not be tested for HPV.

What should I do if I have an abnormal Pap test?

It is important to get the testing or treatment that your healthcare provider recommends specifically for you after your Pap test. While most Pap test abnormalities will go away on their own over time, some will not go away, and may even get worse. It is very important to find any severe abnormalities and treat them so that cancer does not develop.

Stick to the follow-up schedule you are given, and do not skip appointments. If you do not understand something your healthcare provider says, ASK. You and your provider can work together to make sure your cervix stays healthy.