AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR COLPOSCOPY AND CERVICAL PATHOLOGY

The society for lower genital tract disease since 1964

HPV Testing – Is It for Me?

What is HPV?

HPV, human papillomavirus, is an infection that is transmitted through direct skin-to-skin contact. When genital skin is involved, the infection is called "sexually-transmitted".

There are about 100 different types of HPV. Most HPV infections do not cause any health effects at all because they are eliminated by the infected person's immune system before they can do any damage. At times, certain types of HPV ("low risk") can cause minor changes. Usually those types do not cause long-term problems. But other types ("high risk") can cause infected cells to lose control of their own growth; if early changes are not detected and treated, these changes can turn into cancer years later.

Why is this important for women's health?

HPV infection is very common. One of the sites most frequently infected by HPV is the genital tract. Several studies have shown that young sexually active women acquire genital HPV infection at the rate of 15-20% per year. When followed for three years, about 80% of women in those studies tested positive for HPV at one time or another.

When certain "low risk" types of HPV infect the outer genital skin (vulva) or cervix, they can cause genital warts (also known as condylomata acuminata) and harmless changes on the cervix. Other "high risk" types commonly infect the cervix where they can cause potentially precancerous changes (dysplasia), depending on the type of HPV and the duration of the infection. If undetected and untreated for years, some high-risk HPV infections of the cervix can result in cervical cancer. Over 4000 women die each year in the US from cervical cancer.

How is HPV infection spread?

Vaginal, oral and anal sex can all spread HPV. Many individuals who have HPV do not know they have it – they can spread it unknowingly to their sexual partners. Most people who become infected with HPV have gotten it from a partner who had no symptoms at all.

How would I know if I had HPV?

Often infected women and men do not know that that they have an HPV infection. Some individuals develop **genital warts** or **condylomata acuminata** which are small, raised, skin-colored or gray rough-surfaced bumps ranging from the size of sesame seeds to the size of apple seeds or even larger. They usually don't hurt, but they may itch slightly or feel irritated. Your clinician can identify these lesions during an exam.

Other individuals develop HPV infections of the **cervix** (the lower part of the uterus, located at the top of the vagina). These infections do not produce symptoms that are visible to patients. The only way to know about an HPV infection of the cervix is to have a **Pap test** or cervical **HPV test** performed during a pelvic exam. A Pap showing **dysplasia** or **intraepithelial neoplasia** or **cervical cancer** almost always is a result of HPV infection.

What is a Pap test?

In this test, cells are obtained from the cervix and placed on a slide. A specially trained laboratory professional examines the slide and looks for abnormal cells. If abnormal cells are detected, the slide is further reviewed by a pathologist. The Pap test report gives useful and important information to the clinician, helping him or her decide whether further testing is necessary if the results are abnormal.

What is an HPV test?

The **HPV test** is performed either from the same specimen as a Pap test, or from a separate brush sample from the cervix. It detects HPV genetic material (DNA) from the 13 types of HPV most commonly associated with the development of cervical cancer. These are the "high risk" types. Most people who are infected with these types of HPV may never have any related problems. However, women who have a high-risk type of HPV are much more likely than uninfected women to develop a cervical pre-cancer (dysplasia) or cancer over time.

Which test should I get: an HPV test or a Pap test?

The most important test for every sexually active woman to have regularly is the **Pap test**. If her Pap is abnormal, further testing can be done to determine the exact location and nature of the abnormality and to treat it. Early detection and treatment are highly successful at preventing cervical cancer.

Then who should get an HPV test?

The HPV test is helpful in women whose Pap test report is " **atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance",** often abbreviated as **"ASC-US**". This means that the result is inconclusive – it is not normal but it is also not abnormal in any precisely defined way. Some of these inconclusive Pap tests show HPV infection on additional testing. So, the HPV test can help your clinician understand the reason for the inconclusive Pap.

In addition, most experts believe that for women over 30, HPV testing along with a routine Pap test is the best way to screen for dysplasia or cervical cancer. This combination of testing is so reliable that if both tests are normal, the tests should be repeated only every three years. In addition, an HPV test may be recommended as part of follow-up after an abnormal Pap test has been evaluated and possibly treated.

Why not test women under 30 with their Pap test?

HPV is so common and so unlikely to cause problems in young women that finding it is not helpful. On the other hand, the Pap test does find cell changes that *are* important to evaluate.

What if my test is negative?

A woman whose HPV DNA test is negative has only a small chance of having dysplasia or cancer at the time of the test. But she should continue to obtain regular Pap tests to detect any hidden or future infection.

What happens if my HPV test shows that I have HPV?

If you have a positive HPV test and an abnormal Pap, you will most likely be advised to undergo **colposcopy**. This is a procedure in which the cervix is examined using a bright light and magnification. Often a **biopsy** (a small pea-sized piece of tissue) is taken and sent to a pathology lab for examination. The biopsy is the most reliable test and the results of the biopsy, not the Pap or the HPV test, are used in determining the appropriate treatment, if any.

If you have a positive HPV test and a normal Pap test, your healthcare provider will make a personal recommendation for you based on your own individual health circumstances and your past Pap and HPV history.