

What you need to know about HPV

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a virus that most people are exposed to, much like a virus that causes a “cold,” except that HPV is usually spread through sexual contact. It can be spread through genital-genital or oral-genital contact; sexual intercourse is not necessary to spread the virus. Most people get genital HPV infection at some point in their life. If a woman is diagnosed with HPV infection or an HPV-related disease, it is difficult to know for certain when she acquired the infection. Here is more that you should know about HPV:

- ✓ HPV is *not* the same as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the virus that causes AIDS.
- ✓ HPV infection usually goes away on its own because the immune system clears the virus from the body.
- ✓ HPV usually does not cause any symptoms or disease, but sometimes it causes genital warts, abnormal cells in the cervix (the outer end of the uterus), or cancer of the cervix. Genital warts and cervical cancer are each caused by different types of HPV. At some point, your physician will recommend that you have a Pap test. The Pap test is done to find out if you have abnormal changes in the cells of your cervix that are caused by HPV and may eventually turn into cervical cancer. If you have an abnormal Pap test, that usually means you are infected with HPV. You may need to return for more testing and possibly be treated to prevent cervical cancer.
- ✓ Only a very small percentage of women with the HPV types that cause cervical cancer, and whose infection persists (doesn't go away), go on to develop cancer. Cervical cancer is extremely rare in adolescent and young adult women.
- ✓ Physicians do not routinely screen adolescents for HPV, but your doctor may do an HPV test if your Pap test is abnormal, to help decide whether more evaluation is needed.

The best way to prevent HPV infection and its consequences is not to have sexual intercourse (abstinence). If you do have sex, you can lower your risk of HPV infection by limiting the number of people with whom you have sex and by having sex with partners who have had no or few sex partners themselves. Consistent and correct condom use is also important. Although condoms do not completely prevent transmission of HPV, they prevent HPV-related diseases and other sexually transmitted infections such as *Chlamydia* and HIV. You can also reduce the risk of HPV infection, genital warts, and cervical cancer by avoiding smoking. Vaccines that prevent some types of HPV may be available in the next year or two.