



# HPV AND CERVICAL CANCER PREVENTION

## WHAT IS HPV?

HPV is human papillomavirus. HPV is a common virus—more than half of sexually active men and women are infected with HPV at some time. At any time there are approximately 79 million people in the U.S. with HPV.

Some types of HPV may cause symptoms like genital warts. Other types cause cervical lesions which, over a period of time, can develop into cancer if undetected. However, most people have no symptoms of HPV infection, which means they have no idea they have HPV. In most cases, HPV is harmless and the body clears most HPV infections naturally.

## HPV AND CERVICAL CANCER

According to the National Cancer Institute, more than 13,000 women in the U.S. will be diagnosed cervical cancer this year and more than 4,000 of these women will die. Most women with HPV will not develop cervical cancer, but it's very important to have regular screening tests.

Cervical cancer is preventable if precancerous cell changes are detected and treated early, before cervical cancer develops. Cervical cancer usually takes years to progress. Screening can usually catch any potential problems before they progress.

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PAP AND HPV TESTS?

A Pap test is a test to find abnormal cell changes on the cervix (cervical dysplasia) before they have a chance to turn into cancer. A small brush or cotton tipped applicator will be used to take a sample of cervical cells. These cells are examined for abnormal cell changes. For women under 30, recommended screening is with a Pap test alone, once every three years.

An HPV test can detect “high-risk” types of HPV. “High risk” types of HPV can lead to cervical cancer and this test helps healthcare providers know which women are at greatest risk. Co-testing with a Pap/HPV test every five years or testing with the HPV test alone are both options for women ages 30 to 65.

## HPV VACCINES

HPV vaccines can help prevent infection from both high risk HPV types that can lead to cervical cancer and low risk types that cause genital warts. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends all boys and girls get HPV vaccine at age 11 or 12. (Males are at risk for HPV and related diseases, too, so boys and young men are also recommended to be vaccinated.)

The vaccine produces a stronger immune response when taken during the preteen years. For this reason, up until age 14, only two doses of the vaccine are required. Women and men can get the vaccine up to age 45, but for those 15 and older, a full three-dose series is needed.

HPV vaccines don't protect against all types of HPV, though, so women need to continue having Pap tests and, as appropriate, HPV tests even after being vaccinated for HPV.

### KEY POINTS

- HPV is very common. Most sexually active individuals have HPV at some point.
- HPV infections are usually harmless and most are cleared by the body in a year or two.
- With regular screening (Pap and HPV tests) cervical cell changes can be found, treated (if needed), and cancer prevented.



## TAKING CHARGE OF YOUR HEALTH

A majority of women diagnosed with cervical cancer either have never had a Pap test or did not have one in the previous five years. Cervical cancer is completely preventable if precancerous cell changes are detected and treated early, before cervical cancer develops. Regular Pap tests, supplemented by HPV testing, will detect virtually all pre-cancerous changes and cervical cancers.

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