

In the last few years we have heard a lot about Human Papilloma Virus. Still, there is a lot of confusion about what it is, what it does, and how it can affect you. HPV is a very common sexually transmitted virus. Studies have shown that 80-90% of women have been exposed to the virus at some point in their life. Most of them will never know it. The majority of cases cause transient infections that clear within two years. Only 10-20% of cases will persist.

The reason we worry about HPV is because it is linked to several cancers. The most notorious is cervical cancer, but it has also been linked to several other genital cancers. The virus causes the cells to turn over more rapidly which over time can predispose you to cancer.

Not every woman with HPV will have a pap smear that progresses to cancer. Risk factors that can increase your risk include:

- 1) a compromised immune system such as that found with certain medications, HIV, and other diseases that affect the immune system
- 2) smoking—tobacco really feeds the virus
- 3) birth control with estrogen—we aren't sure how this affects cervical cancer but the increased risk is very small and there are other health benefits with being on the pill that would merit staying on it

You can protect yourself against HPV. First of all using condoms in a new relationship can help. Quit smoking and limit your sexual partners. Keep your immune system healthy.

So how do you know if you have HPV? You can be tested with your pap smear but not everyone needs to be tested. Women under 30 are most likely to have it but also most likely to clear the virus. They should only be tested if they have an abnormal pap smear. Women over 30 can elect to have the test combined with their pap smear.

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