

## HPV Fact Sheet

### • What is HPV?

HPV is the short form for Human Papillomavirus. HPV is a family of very common viruses that cause almost all cervical cancers, plus a variety of other problems like common warts, genital warts and plantar warts. HPV also causes cancers of the vulva, vagina, anus, and cancers of the head and neck. Both women and men become infected with HPV types that cause cervical cancer through sexual intercourse and sexual contact.

### • Are there different kinds of HPV?

There are over 100 strains of the HPV virus, with over 35 known different HPV types that infect the genital tract. At least 15 of these can lead to cervical cancer. The most common cancer-causing types of the virus are 16 and 18. This is important to know because these two cervical cancer vaccine protects against these two types 100% of the time.

### • How does HPV work?

An HPV infection rarely leads to cervical cancer. In most women infected with HPV, the cells in the cervix return to normal after the body's immune system destroys the HPV infection without the woman ever having any signs or symptoms of the HPV. However, some HPV infections do not go away and may remain present in the cervical cells for years. The Long-standing infection can lead to changes in the cells that can progress to cancer. It is these cell changes that a Pap test can detect. When the HPV virus is not treated, the cells will continue to change until they become cervical cancer. Because it can last so long in your body before any cell changes occur, it is difficult to know who transmitted the HPV to you. Don't make assumptions and blame your current partner.

### • How common is HPV?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection. It is common in all sexually active people. At least 70% of sexually active people will get HPV at some time in their lives. HPV is most common in young women and men who are in their late teens and early 20s. The CDC estimates that there are 6.2 million new infections each year in the United States. Since it is so common, there is nothing to be ashamed about. If you are diagnosed with HPV, talk to your health care provider about it. Get answers to your questions.

### • What are the signs and symptoms of HPV?

Most women and men do not know when they are infected with HPV. There are usually no symptoms. Anyone who has ever had genital contact with another person, not just sexual intercourse, can get HPV. Both men and women can get it—and pass it on to their sex partners without even realizing it. An abnormal Pap test result is usually a woman's first clue of an infection, but most HPV-infected women do not ever have an abnormal Pap test result. HPV is not HIV or Herpes. They are different viruses with different symptoms.

### • How can I protect against HPV infection?

The only sure way to prevent HPV infection is to abstain from all sexual activity. Sexually active adults can reduce their risk by being in mutually faithful relationship with someone who has had no other or few sex partners, or by limiting their number of sex partners. But even persons with only one lifetime sex partner can get HPV if their partner has had previous partners.

### • Do condoms protect against HPV?

Recent studies suggest that condoms provide some protection against the HPV infection. However, since condoms do not cover all areas of the body involved in sexual contact that can be the source of the spread of HPV, they do not offer complete protection. However, in addition to HPV protection, they do reduce the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted disease when used all the time and in the right way.

- **What are the factors that increase your risk for HPV?**

You are more likely to get HPV if you smoke, if you start having sex at a young age, or if you have many sex partners or your sex partner has many sex partners.

- **Why isn't there an HPV test for men?**

The diseases that HPV causes in women do not happen in men. So the test results will not be helpful for a man.

- **How do I know if I have HPV?**

The only way to know if you have an HPV infection is if your health care provider tests you for the virus. This may be done directly from the Pap test container or by using an additional swab at the time of the Pap test. Your health care provider may or may not perform the HPV test, depending on many factors including your age and risk factors. The only way to tell if a cancer-causing type of HPV infection has caused the cells in your cervix to change is to have a Pap test. Signs of an HPV infection may appear weeks, months or years after the first infection, which is why it is important to have regular Pap tests and HPV tests as recommended by your health care provider.

- **I've been told I have HPV. How do I know if or when it has cleared up?**

Most HPV infections will clear on their own. Those women that have long-standing HPV infections are more at risk for developing cervical precancerous lesions or cervical cancer. There is no shot or pill that is available to clear your HPV infection. Hopefully, as in most women, your body's immune system will clear your HPV infection on its own. If your health care provider is performing an HPV test on you, and your test is negative, it is likely that your infection cleared.

- **Should I get an HPV test?**

The HPV test detects high-risk—or cancer causing— types of HPV that can cause changes in your cervical cells. However, this test cannot tell you the exact type of high-risk HPV. Women 30 years of age and older can have both the Pap test and the HPV test for cervical cancer screening. The HPV test can also be used to help understand the meaning of a borderline abnormal Pap test. In that situation, your health care provider may do an HPV test to find out more about the abnormal cells. However, if your Pap test shows a definite pre-cancerous abnormality, an HPV test is not needed. Virtually all of these changes are caused by HPV. You can assume the HPV test will be positive.

### • When should I get tested for cervical cancer?

You should start getting regular Pap tests at age 21, or within three years of the first time you have sex—whichever happens first. The Pap test is one of the most reliable and effective cancer screening tests available. In addition to the Pap test—the main test for cervical cancer—the HPV test may be used for screening women aged 30 years and older, or at any age for those who have unclear Pap test results. If you are 30 or older, and your screening tests are normal, your chance of getting cervical cancer in the next few years is very low. For that reason, your doctor may tell you that you will not need another screening test for up to three years. But you should still go to the doctor regularly for a check-up that may include a pelvic exam. It also is important for you to continue getting a Pap test regularly—even if you think you are too old to have a child, or are not having sex anymore. If you are older than 65 and have had normal Pap test results for several years, or if you have had your cervix removed (during an operation called a hysterectomy), your doctor may tell you it is okay to stop getting regular Pap tests.

### • Can you prevent HPV?

Good news! There is now a vaccine to prevent HPV infection. Girls and women age 9-26 can protect themselves from HPV and cervical changes related to HPV by getting the cervical cancer vaccine.

### • Is there a cure for HPV?

Currently, there is no cure for the virus. There are treatments for the cervical changes that HPV can cause. If your Pap and HPV tests show that cells in your cervix have changed, you should discuss treatment options with your health care provider.

### • How does the vaccine work?

The cervical cancer vaccine takes prevention a giant leap forward by blocking the first step along the path-way to cervical cancer, HPV infection. The vaccine is given in the arm or thigh three times—at the first visit, two months later and four months after that. The best protection is achieved after all three shots are given. It is not known at this time whether booster shots will be needed later. Studies show that the vaccine is extremely safe. There are no live viruses in the vaccine. The most common side effects are redness and soreness where the shot was given. Headaches (like when you have a cold or fever) are also common. Fever can also occur. Over the counter pain and fever medications will help if you have symptoms. As with any new medication, safety issues will continue to be monitored.

## Remember you can prevent Cervical Cancer by:

### How can I prevent it?

- Get the HPV vaccine. It protects against the types of HPV that most often cause cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers. It is given in a series of three shots. The vaccine is recommended for 11 and 12 year old girls. It is also recommended for girls and women aged 13 through 26 who did not get any or all of the shots when they were younger. (Note: The vaccine can be given to girls beginning at age 9.)
- See your doctor regularly for a Pap test that can find cervical precancer.
- Follow up with your doctor if your test results are not normal.
- Don't smoke.
- Use condoms during sex.\*
- Limit your number of sexual partners.

*With the compliments of the Lebanese Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology*

*(Women's health promotion)*

