

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

The Whole Story

The recent television campaign informing women about the connection between the human papillomavirus (HPV) and cervical cancer also heralds the arrival of a newly developed vaccine that can save women's lives. Despite the great news, the one minute spot has left many viewers with unanswered questions. Just what is this virus? How do you get it and is this something I should be worried about?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection. Numbers vary, but it is estimated that 70% of all sexually active individuals will be infected with it some time in their lives. The prevalence of HPV infection is attributed to the fact that the virus is easily spread through contact with skin beyond the immediate genital area that is not covered by condoms during sexual activity. There are more than 100 different strains of HPV, however, only about 30 types affect the genital area. Some of these HPV strains are known to cause genital warts. Infections with the other strains usually cause no symptoms and, after some time, go away on their own. However, recent research has established that these asymptomatic strains of HPV also cause 90% of cervical cancers, the second leading cause of death among women around the world. The traditional test for early detection of the cellular changes associated with cervical cancer is the Pap test. It is usually done as part of a woman's annual exam by her gynecologist. Now there is an additional test that can diagnose an HPV infection and identify which strains are present.

Even though men can be infected with HPV they do not face the same health risks as women. Genital warts are especially common in younger men. There is not the prevalence of penile cancer in men nor does HPV seem to be the primary cause as is the case with cervical cancer and women. Screening for the virus in men has been a problem because the specimen collection procedure that works so well in women has proven to be unreliable in males.

The new vaccine, Gardasil, is an important development for women because there is currently no cure available for HPV. Good treatments do exist for the problems HPV can cause, but they are expensive and usually require repeated visits to the doctor. Gardasil was found to be effective against four strains of HPV that are known to cause 90% of genital warts and 70% of cervical cancers in women. The vaccine, which has been recommended for women between the ages of 9 and 26, is given in a three shot series over six months. At this time there is no recommendation for men to receive the vaccine.

Gardasil is available through the Saint Mary's College Health and Wellness Services. The approximate cost is \$150.00 per injection. Each of the three doses will be ordered separately at the time it is to be given. We will assist the student in billing their insurance, although, few are covering the cost of the vaccine at this time. A student may also pay by check, cash, credit card, or have the fee billed to their student account.

Since Gardasil does not protect against all strains of HPV immunized women should still practice behaviors that reduce the risks of HPV.



Abstinence is always the best protection against HPV, as well as any other STD.

Condoms, used properly, do provide some protection against HPV.

Do not smoke. Women who smoke are twice as likely to get cervical cancer.

Limit sexual activity to within a mutually monogamous relationship. Women who have multiple partners are at higher risk for getting any STD and for developing cervical cancer .



Have regular (annual) pelvic exams that include a pap test. These exams should begin when a woman is 21 or earlier if she is sexually active.