

Understanding HPV

Please feel free to call the office with any
questions you may have

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WHAT IS HPV

HPV is a virus, (Human Papilloma Virus). There are over 120 different types of the HPV virus, 30 of which are considered genital types. They infect only the skin of the cervix, labia, and vulva, etc.

This virus is spread by sexual contact as well as skin to skin contact. A majority of women have been exposed to the HPV virus at some point.

Most often there is no visible sign of an infection, since only certain types cause genital warts, while others have the potential to cause changes in the cells of your cervix. These changes vary from mild to more severe. Given this information, it is very important that you have pap smears at regular intervals.

It is important that you understand that most sexually active individuals who are having intercourse may be infected with the HPV virus at some point in their lifetime. The infection is most often cleared by your immune system to an undetectable level.

HOW IS IT TREATED

Mild changes on your pap smear are often reported as ASCUS: Atypical Squamous Cells of Undetermined Significance. Previously the recommended treatment of an ASCUS result was to repeat the pap smear in three months. We now have an additional test that checks for the HPV virus that can cause more severe changes. HPV testing is now considered to be the preferred approach to managing women with ASCUS pap results.

If you have had a pap smear with ASCUS results and a negative HPV test, you need only repeat your pap smear in one (1) year. The negative HPV result is reassuring as it takes several years of persistent infection with a high risk type of the HPV virus to cause a more severe change in the cells of your cervix.

An abnormal pap smear result with a positive HPV result will require closer follow up. This may consist of frequent pap follow up, colposcopy, or other testing that your doctor feels is appropriate. Based on the results of this additional follow up your doctor will recommend a course of treatment.

THINGS TO KNOW

- Many women can have HPV at some point, but very few will develop cancer.
- Most HPV infections are temporary and go away on their own.
- Only high-risk HPV infections that do not go away can lead to cervical cancer over many years.
- Cervical cancer is rare and almost always preventable through regular pap testing. Early detection of abnormal cell changes that can lead to cancer is important.
- Don't blame. Your HPV status is not a reliable indicator of your sexual behavior or that of your partner.