

All About HPV Testing

What is HPV?

HPV, human papillomavirus ("pappy-lo-ma virus"), is a wart virus that is passed through skin-to-skin contact. There are about 100 different types of HPV, including common skin warts.

Most types of HPV do not cause any health effects, because the person's immune system gets rid of them. "High risk" types of HPV, that grow on the cervix of the uterus, can make cervix cells grow abnormally. Without treatment, these changes could turn into cancer, years later.

Why is this important for women's health?

HPV infection is common. About 80% of women test positive for HPV at one time or another. If high-risk HPV infections on the cervix are not found and not treated for years, they can turn into cervical cancer. Over 4000 women die each year in the USA from cervical cancer.

How is HPV infection spread?

Vaginal, oral and anal sex can all spread HPV. Many persons who have HPV do not know they have it. *Most people with HPV have gotten it from someone who had no symptoms at all.*

How would I know if I had HPV?

Some people develop genital warts, which are like regular skin warts. They indicate that the person might have HPV in other places, too.

Some women develop HPV in the cervix. These infections usually have no symptoms (no skin warts). *The only way to know about an HPV infection of the cervix is to have a Pap test and HPV test.* They are done at the same time.

It is also possible to get HPV from anal sex, without any symptoms. Pap and HPV tests can be done in this area too, using a tiny cotton swab. HPV in the throat, from oral sex, can cause hoarseness and a change in the voice, and a special exam by a throat doctor might be needed.

Which test should I get: an HPV test or a Pap test?

The Pap test is the most important test for women to have regularly. With the Pap test, the lab looks at the cervical skin cells under a microscope, to see if they are normal or abnormal.

If a woman's Pap is abnormal, extra testing is done to find out the exact location and nature of the abnormality. Early detection and treatment are very good at stopping cervical cancer.

Then who should get an HPV test?

1. For women over 30, HPV testing plus a Pap test is the best way to screen for cervical cancer caused by persistent HPV. If both tests are normal, you only need them every three years.
2. Get an HPV test if your Pap test shows ASCUS ("ask-us"), which means "atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance." ASCUS means the result is uncertain – it's not normal, but we can't tell if it's harmful or harmless. The HPV test can help to figure out the reason for the uncertain Pap.
3. An HPV test may be recommended as part of follow-up after an abnormal Pap test has been evaluated and/or treated.

Why not test women under 30 for HPV, with their Pap test?

HPV is so common in young women, and so unlikely to cause problems in young women, that we don't test for it in young women. It is likely to go away by itself. On the other hand, the Pap test does find cell changes in young women that are important.

What happens if my HPV test shows that I have HPV?

If you have a positive HPV test *plus* an abnormal Pap, you will need a colposcopy ("cull-poss-co-pee") - like a Pap test, but using a microscope that looks like a pair of binoculars. Often a biopsy is taken (a pinch of skin from the cervix). The results of the biopsy are used to plan treatment, if any is needed.

What kind of treatments do people get for abnormal cells or cervical cancer?

Early abnormal cells can be destroyed the same way regular skin warts are destroyed - with heat, cold, laser, or surgery. Cancers that have spread usually need surgery, and possibly other cancer treatments too.