Your Pap Test

Screening for cervical cancer consists of regular Pap tests for women who have reached 21 years of age. The Pap test screens for precancerous cells of the cervix. These precancerous cells are termed dysplasia and are divided into low- grade and high-grade abnormalities. Low-grade lesions (mild dysplasia) often resolve on their own with up to 70% of abnormal cells returning to normal over time. Low-grade lesions can, however, progress to high-grade lesions (severe dysplasia). While high-grade lesions are not cancer, they may eventually lead to cancer if left untreated. If high-grade abnormal cells are found on a Pap test, a procedure called a Colposcopy with a biopsy of any abnormal areas is recommended.

Human Papilloma Virus

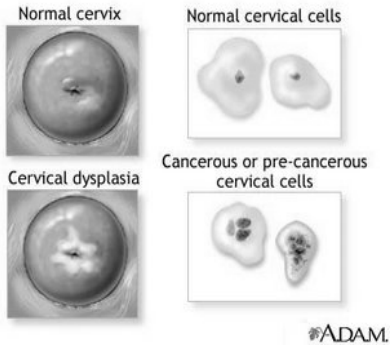
Human papilloma viruses (HPV) are a group of more than 100 viruses. Some virus types cause genital warts or papillomas, which are benign (noncancerous) tumors. Genital warts are most commonly associated with just a few of the HPV strains. Of the more than 100 strains of HPV, over 30 strains can be passed from one person to another during sexual contact. Warts may appear within several weeks after contact, or they may take months or even years to appear. Some strains of HPV have also been shown to effect the cells of the cervix causing and produce no symptoms, where other strains effect the cells of the cervix and may cause cervical cancer.

HPV and Cancer Risk

The HPV strains that cause cervical cancer are divided into low and high risk types. HPV strains that are associated with cervical cancer are referred to as “high-risk” virus types. While both high-risk and low-risk types of HPV can cause the growth of abnormal cells, only the high-risk types of HPV may lead to cervical cancer.

Risk Factors for HPV and Cervical Cancer

Behaviors such as beginning sexual intercourse at an early age (especially age 16 or younger) and having multiple sexual partners increase the chance that a woman may develop an HPV infection in the cervix. An infection with high-risk HPV type may increase the chance that changes in the cervical cells with progress to more severe abnormalities or cervical cancer. Still, of the women who do develop abnormal cellular changes with high-risk types of HPV, only a small percentage will develop cervical cancer if the abnormal cells are not treated. Studies suggest that a variety of factors in combination with high-risk HPV influence a women’s likelihood of developing cervical cancer; these include smoking, recurrent Chlamydia infections, poor nutritional intake and multiple pregnancies.



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Your Pap Test

Treatment of HPV Infections

Although there is currently no medical cure to eliminate an HPV infection, the lesions and warts caused by the virus can be treated. Methods used for treatment include cryosurgery (freezing that destroys tissue), laser treatment (surgery using high-intensity light), LEEP (loop electrosurgical excision procedure – the removal of tissue using a hot wire loop), as well as conventional surgery. With the close association between HPV and precancerous cells, testing cervical cell samples (Pap test) for HPV allows your medical practitioner to better manage abnormal Pap test results. It is now recommended that HPV testing be preformed on all patients whose Pap test results abnormal. This allows for early identification, intervention and treatment of patients at risk of developing cervical cancer.

Please ask you practitioner if you have any additional questions about your Pap test.

If you are a registered Millersville University student and you have questions or you need to make an appointment, please call Millersville University Health Services at 871-5250.