



HPV the “Silent STD” can cause Cervical Cancer

By Stacia Soliday, ARNP



Women don't often talk about pelvic exams and sexually transmitted diseases in casual conversation. However, there is one STD lurking in the shadows of women's health which can be cancer causing and needs more open discussion – even by women in their teens and early 20's.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is by far the most widespread STD in America with 20 million women and men infected. Because the vast majority of people don't know they have the virus and most cases have no symptoms, HPV is known as the “Silent STD” and can be deadly. It is the major cause of cervical cancer and the reason for having an annual Pap tests no matter what your age.

There are many types of HPV, but our main focus will be on the two most common -- genital warts and cancer-causing HPV. Both are contracted through sexual contact with someone who is infected. Both can lay hidden for months or years and often this virus is contracted by teens and people in their early 20's.

Genital warts

Genital warts occur in 20 percent of HPV cases. These warts can develop weeks, months – even years after the initial infection. Though some warts are visible, many genital warts, especially in women, are too small to be seen or are inside the body on the cervix. Just because you don't see genital warts, doesn't mean your partner isn't infected and using a condom does not guarantee protection from contracting HPV.

Many warts carry no symptoms, but burning, itching or pain during intercourse, are common complaints. Although the warts themselves can be removed or treated with medications, there is no cure for the virus. Annual Pap testing is necessary to monitor HPV.

Cancer-causing HPV

This form of HPV is much more sinister. It can lay dormant for years before causing cell changes that lead to cervical cancer – the second most common cancer in women.

Thanks to the invention of the Pap smear over 50 years ago, cervical cancer is also one of the most preventable forms of cancer. With the very recent innovation of the *liquid* Pap test, diagnosis is now much more accurate. Liquid pap tests like the one used by North Basin Medical Clinics are 64.4 percent more accurate than traditional testing and should be performed on an annual basis.

Cervical cancer can be deadly, but early detection can save your life. You can be symptom free and still have cervical cancer. Signs and symptoms of cervical cancer don't always present themselves until the later stages of development. Symptoms include...

- Bleeding between menstrual cycles
- Any unusual vaginal discharge or pain
- Bleeding after intercourse
- Bleeding after menopause

Of course, risk increases for women who started having sex before age 18, or have had many partners. As the cells near the cervix are more susceptible to trauma and infection in teens and younger women, it is much easier to contract Human Papillomavirus at a young age.

If you have any questions about HPV, contact your healthcare provider or make an appointment.

Stacia Soliday is a Nurse Practitioner at Lincoln Hospital and North Basin Medical Clinics.