

HPV and Pap Tests

Q. What's HPV and why is it important?

A. HPV (human papillomavirus) is a very common infection of the lower genital tract (vulva, vagina, and cervix) among women who have ever had sexual intercourse. About 80% of sexually active college women contract HPV during their college years. Most (about 80%) of those HPV infections go away on their own within 1 to 2 years and never cause any health problems. But certain types of HPV can persist for a long time and cause changes on the cervix that can develop into cancer if they are not detected and treated. Precancerous changes can be detected with Pap tests, evaluated with additional testing, and eradicated with safe and effective treatments.

Q. I have an abnormal Pap and a positive test for HPV. What does that mean?

A. It means that you have been infected with HPV and are at risk for developing cervical changes ("dysplasia" or "CIN") which could become cancer if the infection persists for more than a few years. You need further evaluation to determine whether the abnormal cells on your Pap come from a precancerous change on your cervix. Usually, examination with a special magnifying light, a colposcope, is the first step in that evaluation. Often a tiny piece of tissue, a biopsy, is taken and sent for analysis by a pathologist. If an area of precancerous change is present, it needs to be treated to prevent the development of cancer in the future. If a precancerous change is not detected by colposcopy, you need regular follow-up to determine whether the infection and the abnormal cells go away. If the changes don't disappear after a year, you will most likely need another colposcopy.

Q. I was told my Pap was atypical but my HPV test is negative. Am I at risk for developing cancer?

A. A negative HPV test is extremely reliable. It means that you have less than a 1% chance of developing a precancer or cancer of the cervix in the next few years. Your atypical Pap was due to a normal variation in the size

and shape of cervical cells, not to HPV infection. You need regular follow-up in 1 to 3 years, as recommended by your health care provider.

Q. I have a normal Pap but a positive HPV test. What should I do?

A. You need to be sure to get regular follow-up as recommended by your health care provider. You are at some risk for developing a precancer (cervical changes that could eventually turn into cancer). Fortunately, these changes take a long time to develop and regular Paps (and other types of follow-up when appropriate) will be able to detect them in time to have appropriate evaluation and treatment and prevent cervical cancer.

Q. Why do I need a Pap at all? Couldn't I just have an HPV test?

A. The Pap detects abnormalities that are present now, and the HPV test tells you whether you are at risk for developing abnormalities in the next few years. Since most HPV infections in young women go away without causing cell damage, HPV tests are performed on women under 30 only when they have abnormal cells on their Pap test.

After age 30, a positive HPV test is more likely to reflect a persistent infection and a higher risk of precancer. The FDA has approved the use of combined Pap/HPV testing every two years only in women over 30. The Pap can detect a very few abnormalities that are not detected by a single HPV test.

Q. I have heard about the HPV vaccine. Can I get it?

A. The vaccine is available at both the Gynecology and General Medicine Clinics at Student Health. The Gynecology Clinic holds group education and vaccination sessions several times each week. Call 924-2773 for an appointment for one of the sessions. General Medicine provides the vaccine during regular immunization hours (M-F: 9 a.m. - 12 n. and 2 - 4 p.m.) without an appointment.

Student Health is unable to bill your insurance plan directly unless you are covered by Chickering or Southern Health. The cost for each of the three shots is about \$150.

For additional information, see the UVa Student Health website:
<http://www.virginia.edu/studenthealth/HPV%20Vaccine.html>