

HPV, Cervical Cancer and You

There are more than 100 types of human papillomaviruses. Some of them do not cause health problems and may go away on their own. But others can be potentially deadly, especially types 16 and 18 that cause approximately 70 percent of cervical cancers.

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a sexually transmitted virus that can be passed through genital or skin-to-skin contact. Both men and women can unknowingly have HPV and pass it to another person. More than 6 million people, usually young men and women in their late teens and early twenties, get HPV in the United States every year.

There is no cure for HPV, but a highly effective vaccine is now available against HPV types 16 and 18, as well as types 6 and 11 that cause 90 percent of genital warts. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved Gardasil® for girls and women ages nine to 26. The vaccine should be given before the start of sexual activity. Gardasil® is administered in three doses spaced out over a six month period. Because the vaccine is new, the FDA has not yet determined if a booster shot is needed after several years.

An HPV DNA test can be done to detect the presence of any of the 13 types of the virus (including 16 and 18) that are most likely to cause cervical cancer. This DNA test is not a substitute for a regular Pap screening. Rather, it is used as a follow-up for women who have had an ambiguous Pap test or for women over the age of 30 as a general cervical cancer screening.

Cervical cancer often can be cured when detected and treated early. Thanks to the Pap test, the death rate from cervical cancer has decreased considerably over the last 50 years. Still, the American Cancer Society estimates that more than 11,150 women will be diagnosed with invasive cervical cancer this year and about 3,670 women will die from the disease.

Treatment for noninvasive cervical cancer usually requires the removal of the targeted area of cells. This can be done by performing a cone biopsy (a cone shaped piece of abnormal cervical tissue is removed), laser surgery (a narrow beam of intense light kills precancerous or cancerous cells), cryosurgery (the irregular cells are frozen and killed), loop electrosurgical excision procedure (an electrified wire loop is used to remove cells) or simple hysterectomy (removal of abnormal cells, cervix and uterus).

For invasive cancers, a radical hysterectomy may be performed to remove the cancer, cervix, uterus, part of the vagina and lymph nodes in the area. Radiation therapy is often the best treatment for women with advanced cervical cancer. Chemotherapy may be used to control advanced cervical cancer that is incurable.

Half of all cervical cancer cases are diagnosed in women between the ages of 35 and 55. But you can reduce your risk of developing cervical cancer by preventing HPV infection and having routine Pap tests. For more information about HPV and cervical cancer, call Spring-Klein OB/GYN at 281-440-1770.