Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

WHAT IS HPV?

HPV stands for human papillomavirus. HPV is a common virus that can be passed during sexual contact. There are more than 100 different strains or types of HPV. Over 30 of these are sexually transmitted, and they can infect either male or female genital areas.

HPV is extremely common, such that 50% to 75% of sexually active men and women get a genital HPV infection at some point in their lives. Approximately 20 million people are currently infected with HPV.

HOW DO PEOPLE GET GENITAL HPV INFECTIONS?

The virus causing the genital HPV infection is spread primarily through oral, anal, and genital sexual contact, but also through external genital-to-genital touching or hand-to-genital contact. Rarely, pregnant women can pass HPV to their baby during vaginal delivery.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Most people who have a genital HPV infection do not know they are infected. The virus lives in the skin or mucus membranes and usually causes no symptoms.

Genital warts usually appear as soft, moist, pink or red swellings. They can be raised or flat, single or multiple, small or large. Some cluster together forming a cauliflower-like shape.

Warts can appear within several weeks after sexual contact with an infected person, or they can take months to appear. On the female, these warts are commonly found on or around the vaginal opening, vaginal lips, in the vagina, on the cervix, and around the rectum. On the male, the warts may be found on any part of the penis, the scrotum, and around the rectum.

HOW CAN I FIND OUT IF I HAVE IT?

Pap tests are the primary screening tool for cervical cancer or pre-cancerous conditions that are associated with HPV infections. Most women are diagnosed with HPV on the basis of abnormal Pap tests, which show cell changes related to HPV. Direct testing for the high-risk types of HPV is available for women with a questionable or mildly abnormal Pap test. If genital warts are present, a diagnosis can usually be made from their appearance. HPV testing of genital warts can occasionally be helpful but is usually not necessary.

HOW IS HPV TREATED?

Take care of yourself. When you have HPV, a strong immune system is important. Keeping your immune system healthy can be accomplished by:

- Getting adequate rest
- Controlling stress
- Avoiding Smoking
- Improving your nutrition

While there is no treatment for the virus itself, there are treatments for the health problems that HPV can cause:

- Genital warts can be treated by your healthcare provider or with a prescription. Without treatment, genital warts might go away, stay the same, or grow in size or number.
- Cervical pre-cancer can be treated. Pap tests and follow ups as needed can identify problems before cancer develops.

HOW CAN A GENITAL HPV INFECTION BE PREVENTED?

- Abstinence from oral, anal, and vaginal sex.
- Two uninfected individuals who have no other sex partners besides each other cannot get a genital HPV infection.
- Not having sex with someone who has genital sores or unusual growths in the genital area or anus.
- Male condoms can reduce, but does not eliminate, the risk of transmission to uninfected partners.
- Getting a regular Pap test.
- Gardasil vaccine helps prevent certain types of HPV associated with cervical cancer.

Learn how you can protect your health at: www.adagiohealth.org