Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a common sexually transmitted infection (STI). It is estimated that, because this virus is transmitted by skin-to-skin genital contact, 80% of sexually-active college students will become infected with it before graduation. The good news is that, for most people, infection occurs without symptoms or complications, and the body’s own immune system clears it within two years (much as your immune system clears a common cold, although with HPV, it takes longer). In a small percentage of people, however, the viral infection persists and can cause problems.

**Risks associated with infection**

Over 40 different subtypes of HPV (including over 100 strains) infect the human genitalia. These are divided into two main groups, low-risk and high-risk. In this case, “risk” refers to the likelihood that the virus will predispose a person (male or female) to developing pre-cancerous changes within the infected tissues.

**Low risk HPV subtypes** (6 and 11) are most common) tend to infect the scrotum, penis, anal area, and vulva. If they cause symptoms, it’s typically in the form of genital warts. The warts are fleshy, painless growths that may be small or large, single or multiple. Warts are not dangerous but they can be potentially uncomfortable and/or unsightly.

**High-risk HPV subtypes** (16 and 18 are most common) tend to infect the cervix and occasionally the anal area. If not cleared by the body’s immune system, they can cause pre-cancerous changes of these tissues. Usually the infected person has no symptoms at all, so regular check-ups are important.

**Detection**

Because most sexually-active people will become infected with at least one strain of HPV at some point and not experience any problems as a result, *routine testing for the presence of HPV is not recommended*. It is, however, important to watch for the rare problems that the HPV can cause (i.e., warts and/or cell changes).

For women, routine gynecological check-ups, with Pap smears every three years are the best way to detect changes to the cervix that may result from persistent HPV infection. In fact, regular Pap tests are extremely effective in preventing cervical cancer, for they detect changes early on before the disease can progress.

For men, a clinician can look for the presence of genital warts. Unfortunately, there is *no routinely-recommended screening test for men*, but current studies are evaluating the efficacy of Pap tests of the anal area to look for high-risk HPV in those who engage in receptive anal intercourse.

Remember, most people infected with HPV will have no symptoms and no abnormalities on the Pap tests. Of those who do have symptoms or an abnormal test, the vast majority will resolve (heal) on their own within two years.

**Treatment**

Genital warts can be treated by a variety of methods, including the use of special medications, the application of a prescription cream, or freezing. All of these treatments are available at Gannett and can be discussed with your clinician.

Cervical changes from HPV may require more frequent monitoring with Pap tests and colposcopy. Colposcopy is a way to more thoroughly evaluate the cervix by looking at it through a magnifier and taking small tissue samples for closer analysis.

**Prevention**

Because HPV is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact of the genitals (typically by friction or rubbing) and not exclusively through penetration, prevention can be challenging. The strains of HPV that infect the genitals do not tend to infect the hands, so mutual masturbation is not likely to cause transmission. Condom use can *significantly decrease the likelihood of infection of the cervix or anus*, but it does not fully protect other genital areas (e.g., the labia, scrotum, perineum, etc.) that may experience skin-to-skin contact. It may also reduce your risk of acquiring additional types of HPV.

A vaccine that protects against several strains of HPV is currently available to both women and men. The vaccine is given in a 3-shot regimen over several months. Some health insurance companies, including Cornell’s Student Health Plan (SHP), cover the cost of vaccination for those 26 years of age and younger. Additional financial assistance is available through special programs. Discuss with your clinician whether vaccination is advisable.

Additional information about HPV vaccine is available at: [www.gannett.cornell.edu](http://www.gannett.cornell.edu) [search Gardasil].

**Contact us:**

We are open Monday–Saturday, except for breaks. Check the website for hours: [www.gannett.cornell.edu](http://www.gannett.cornell.edu)

**phone:** 607.255.5155

**fax:** 607.255.0269

110 Ho Plaza, Ithaca, NY 14853-3101

7/15