

I'm HPV Positive.... What does that mean for me?

Learning that you are HPV positive can lead to a variety of feelings and raise a number of questions. First and foremost, it's important to realize that being HPV positive is nothing to be ashamed of and it does not mean you have a disease.

How did I get HPV?

"Human papillomavirus", or HPV, is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the world! It can infect anyone who has ever had a sexual encounter, even without penetration. It is transmitted by "skin to skin" contact. Chances are, at least 70% of people are infected with HPV at some point in their lives but it usually disappears on its own within about two years, without a person ever knowing they had it.

There are over 100 types of HPV. Most of them are harmless and cause no signs or symptoms. Approximately 40 HPV types can infect the genital region. Some of them are considered "low risk" and can cause anal or genital warts. These low risk types do not cause cancer. Of the 40 types that affect the genital region, approximately 13 to 15 are "high risk". This means they may potentially cause pre-cancerous lesions, cervical, anal, or other genital cancers. In most cases, in order for one of these high risk types of HPV to cause cervical cancer, it has to be present for 10 or more years.

What are my options?

Your HPV testing shows that you are positive for one or more of the high risk types of HPV. HPV testing allows doctors the opportunity to identify if you are at risk or not for having any cell changes on your cervix. As a result, you will be monitored closely to determine if the HPV clears on its own or if it has caused any cell changes on your cervix. This may involve another screening appointment in a few months time, or a colposcopy. A colposcopy is a procedure where a specialist examines your cervix more closely than is possible in a regular screening exam.

It's important to know that just because you are HPV positive, does not mean you have cervical cancer, or that you will develop cervical cancer. Cervical cancer can be prevented with close monitoring because most times, HPV infections clear on their own.

Can I do anything to prevent HPV infection?

Because the virus is so contagious, total prevention (aside from abstinence) is not that easy. Condom use can help, but not completely eliminate the risk of transmission of HPV since the virus is passed through skin to skin contact and not exchange of bodily fluids. If you smoke, stopping smoking may help clear lesions and decrease risks of developing cervical or other cancers. Limiting the number of sexual partners may also decrease your risk of acquiring HPV. Regular screening is the most important element in the prevention of cervical cancer or pre-cancer changes related to HPV.

Should I get the HPV vaccine?

The vaccine currently available can protect against 4 types of HPV. Two “low risk” types (HPV 6 and 11 which cause genital warts) and two “high risk” types (HPV 16 and 18, which are responsible for 70% of cervical cancers). The vaccine cannot treat an HPV infection, nor can it prevent infection if you are already infected with one of the types in the vaccine. In addition, it is currently only licensed in Canada for females aged 9 to 26. If you are indeed interested in exploring vaccination further, discuss this with your family practitioner.

For a variety of useful information on HPV we encourage you to visit the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada website:

www.hpvinfo.ca