FACT SHEET ON

HPV

Facts You Need to Know

- HPV (human papillomavirus) is one of the most common sexually transmitted diseases (STD) in the U.S. About 6.2 million people get genital HPV each year.
- HPV is the name of a group of viruses that infect the skin. There are about 100 different types of HPV. Certain types cause warts on the hands and feet. About 30 types cause genital infection and can cause genital warts or abnormal cell changes in the cervix.
- At any one time, about 20 million people are infected with HPV, though most have no visible symptoms and are unaware of it.
- About 80 percent of all sexually active people have been infected with HPV at some point in their lives.
- The immune system of most healthy people is able to suppress HPV within a few months.
- Certain HPV viruses are linked to cervical and other cancers. These viruses are called high-risk types. HPV viruses that are not linked to cancer are called low-risk types.
- Though tens of millions of women have high-risk HPV, a very small percentage develop cervical cancer.
- Regular Pap tests can prevent cervical cancer or diagnose it in early stages. With early diagnosis, cervical cancer can be treated and cured.

Who's Likely to Get HPV?

- About 4.6 million young people aged 15–24 get HPV each year. They account for nearly three-quarters (74%) of all new infections.
- HPV is especially common in young women and usually disappears on its own. However, the presence of HPV in women over 30—particularly those in monogamous relationships—may indicate a persistent, long-standing infection.
- About 13,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer each year. About 99 percent of cervical cancer tissue contains high-risk HPV.

How Is HPV Transmitted?

- Genital HPV is most easily transmitted by direct skin-to-skin contact. Sexual activity is the most common form of transmission.
- Because genital HPV infections usually have no symptoms, the virus is most often transmitted unknowingly.
- HPV can have a long latency period in the body, where no symptoms appear for months or even years after infection.
- There is no apparent link between HPV, miscarriage, premature delivery or other pregnancy complications. The risk of transmitting the virus to one's baby is very low.

Costs and Consequences

- The direct medical costs of treating cervical cancer in young women aged 15–24 are about $2.9 billion a year. The costs of treating all HPV-related infections are much higher.

Prevention and Treatment Basics

- Outside of sexual abstinence, the surest way to avoid getting HPV is to refrain from sexual contact with an infected person or to be in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship with an uninfected person.
- Using condoms consistently and correctly can reduce the risk of getting HPV-related diseases, such as genital warts and cervical cell abnormalities. However, condoms do not protect all genital areas, and therefore, cannot completely prevent the spread of HPV.
- Regular screening through Pap and DNA tests can catch cervical cancer in its early stages, when there are no symptoms.

- Since cervical cancer typically takes 5–10 years to develop, regular screening can prevent or cure nearly all cases.
- Genital warts can now be treated with patient-applied topical therapies as well as through conventional clinic-based approaches.
- Pap tests can detect abnormal, precancerous or cancerous cell changes in the cervix, but cannot directly diagnose HPV.
- Specialized DNA tests can diagnose HPV in the cervix. These DNA tests are routinely used to clarify Pap test results that are unclear. They are also approved for primary screening in women over 30 (in combination with conventional Pap testing).
- Tests of an experimental vaccine designed to protect women against high-risk HPV have shown that the vaccine provides total (100%) protection.

Public Health and Policy Issues

- Pap testing and DNA HPV testing should be widely available and accessible to low-income women.
- Follow-up treatment should be offered to those with cervical abnormalities. Such treatment has been shown to prevent cervical cancer deaths.

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