Cervical cancer can be prevented by HPV vaccination and having regular smears.

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CERVICAL SMEARS AND HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS INFECTION (HPV)

If you have had a smear abnormality and/or have been referred to the colposcopy clinic you should read this pamphlet.

What is HPV?
HPV is one of the most common viral infections. It is so common that many experts believe HPV infection should be considered an inevitable consequence of normal sexual activity. More than 150 types of HPV have been identified. Approximately 40 HPV types infect the vulva, vagina, cervix, penis, anus and throat. In most people the virus is harmless and causes no symptoms (you won’t know you have it) and will not develop into warts, pre-cancer or cancer.

Most genital tract HPV infections are relatively brief and most infections have disappeared within 2 years. There is no treatment to eliminate HPV itself. HPV is usually dealt with by your body’s immune system.

In a few people, HPV causes genital warts which are harmless and different from the types of HPV that cause abnormal cells or cancer.

In a few people, HPV can cause abnormal cells which can sometimes lead to cancers in both men and women, including cervical, vaginal, vulval, anal, head and neck cancers and penile cancers.

How and when did I get HPV?
80% of unvaccinated adults will pick up HPV at some point in their life. HPV infection results from skin-to-skin contact and can be transmitted by penetrative as well as non-penetrative sexual contact (genital-genital, oral-genital, anal-genital, oral-anal).

It can occur when there has been only one lifetime sexual partner. HPV can lie dormant for many years. There is no way to know which partner it came from or how long ago. Having HPV does not mean that a person is having sex outside the current relationship.

The interval between infection with HPV and a cervical smear abnormality can vary from months to decades. Abnormal smears can occur in women who have not been sexually active for many years.

What does this mean for my partner?
Partners usually share HPV. This is normal. In new relationships, condoms do provide some protection against HPV and offer good protection from many other sexually transmitted infections.

It is not clear if there is any health benefit to informing (future) partners about a past diagnosis of genital HPV or warts. This is because it is not known how long the virus remains and for most people, the virus is either suppressed or cleared by the immune system.

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It can occur when there has been only one lifetime sexual partner. HPV can lie dormant for many years. There is no way to know which partner it came from or how long ago. Having HPV does not mean that a person has (or will get) cancer. Most women who have HPV do not develop abnormal cells or cancer.

Having HPV does not mean that a person or their partner is having sex outside the current relationship.

What is HPV infection?
HPV infection is usually cleared by the body’s own immune system within months to a few years.

Abnormal cervical smears are called ‘Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia’ (CIN). CIN is categorised as low grade CIN1, or high grade CIN2 to 3. The majority of low grade changes, i.e. CIN1, are harmless and return to normal by themselves. Women with high grade, i.e. CIN2 to 3, are treated because of a risk of progressing to cancer if not treated. High grade changes are not cancers and they take many many years to turn into cancer.

Depending on the degree of smear abnormality and sometimes HPV DNA result, your doctor or nurse will recommend that you have a colposcopy examination. HPV DNA tests are used in certain clinical situations, usually in conjunction with your smear test. The test can be helpful in deciding what follow-up you require. More information on HPV testing is available on www.nsu.govt.nz/national-cervical-screening-programme/hpv-and-cervical-cancer/hpv-testing.

A colposcope is like a pair of medical binoculars on a stand and it magnifies the cells on the cervix. Colposcopy shows where the abnormal cells are. A tiny piece of tissue may be removed (a biopsy) which may cause brief discomfort. The biopsy is sent to a laboratory to confirm if an abnormality is present. These procedures are simple and require only a short visit to a hospital clinic or private specialist.

It is usually impossible to know when HPV infection occurred.
HPV infection is usually transient (not permanent).

What does having HPV mean for me?
HPV is a very common infection and often clears by natural immunity. Having HPV does not mean that a person has (or will get) cancer.

Most women who have HPV do not develop abnormal cells or cancer.

Only a very small number of women with HPV infection are at risk of cervical smear abnormalities or cervical cancer.

What is the management of abnormal cervical smears?
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Depending on the results of the colposcopy and/or biopsy, you may be advised to have a repeat cervical smear, a further colposcopy, or it may be recommended that the abnormal cells are removed by a simple outpatient treatment.

In some situations your specialist may request HPV Type testing to assist in further management.

Treatment is only required if there are certain abnormal cell changes of the cervix.

What does this mean for my partner?
Partners will inevitably share HPV. This is normal. In new relationships, condoms do provide some protection against HPV and offer good protection from many other sexually transmitted infections.

It is not clear if there is any health benefit to informing (future) partners about a past diagnosis of genital HPV or warts. This is because it is not known how long the virus remains and for most people, the virus is either suppressed or cleared by the immune system.

Partners usually share HPV.

What about the future?
Most cervical cancers can be prevented by HPV vaccination and having regular cervical screening. Vaccination, regular screening, and following National Cervical Screening Programme (NCSP) recommended guidelines if any abnormalities are identified, is the most effective pathway for women to follow to prevent invasive cervical cancer developing. There is no evidence that HPV will affect your ability to have children.

Smoking decreases the immune system’s ability to deal with the wart virus and therefore may increase your risk of developing abnormal cell changes.

HPV vaccines
Preventive vaccines are now available which provide protection from almost all HPV infections that cause abnormal cells.

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In a few people, HPV can cause abnormal cells which can sometimes lead to cancers in both men and women, including cervical, vaginal, vulval, anal, head and neck cancers and penile cancers.

How and when did I get HPV?
80% of unvaccinated adults will pick up HPV at some point in their life. HPV infection results from skin-to-skin contact and can be transmitted by penetrative as well as non-penetrative sexual contact (genital-genital, oral-genital, anal-genital, oral-anal).

It can occur when there has been only one lifetime sexual partner. Partners usually share HPV.

In a few people the virus is harmless and returns to normal by itself. In most people the virus is either suppressed or cleared by the immune system within months to a few years.

Abnormal cervical warts are called ‘Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia’ (CIN). CIN is categorised as low grade CIN1, or high grade CIN2 to 3. The majority of low grade changes, i.e. CIN1, are harmless and return to normal by themselves. Women with high grade, i.e. CIN2 to 3, are treated because of a risk of progressing to cancer if not treated. High grade changes are not cancers and they take many many years to turn into cancer.

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What does having HPV mean for me?
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HPV infection is usually cleared by the body’s own immune system within months to a few years.

It can occur when there has been only one lifetime sexual partner. Partners usually share HPV.

Most women who have HPV do not develop abnormal cells or cancer. Having HPV does not mean that a person has (or will get) cancer. Most women who have HPV do not develop abnormal cells or cancer.

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What about the future?
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What is normal sexual activity?

It can occur when there has been only one lifetime sexual partner.

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Cervical Smears and Human Papillomavirus Infection (HPV)

New Zealand HPV Project
Sexually Transmitted Infections Education Foundation

Copies of this booklet are available from:
STIEF, PO Box 2437, Shortland St, Auckland 1140, New Zealand
Email: info@hpv.org.nz
www.hpv.org.nz

Helpline Tollfree 0508 11 12 13   Phone: 09 433 6526

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