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## Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

HPV, or human papillomavirus, is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the United States. It is spread by having vaginal, anal or oral sex with someone infected with HPV. The majority of US adults will be infected by HPV at some point in their life.

There are many different strains of HPV. HPV usually does not cause any overt symptoms. Infection can be spread from person-to-person even in the absence of symptoms. HPV infection can sometimes lead to genital warts or cancers. It is often impossible to tell when HPV infection first occurred as it can lead to symptoms or a positive screening test years after initial exposure.

In the vast majority of cases, HPV will go away on its own without treatment in 1-3 years, especially in young and healthy individuals.

If HPV persists, it can sometimes lead to cervical cancer and rarely vulvar, vaginal, penile, anal or esophageal cancers. The development of cancer is rare and typically occurs over a long process, years after the initial infection.

We assess for HPV infection and cellular abnormalities that occur due to HPV with cervical cancer screenings, also called pap smears, which are routinely done from 21-65 years old in women. Early detection and screening helps to prevent progression to cervical cancer.

You can help to prevent HPV by using condoms with each sexual encounter and only having sex with 1 person at a time. Unfortunately, condoms do not always protect against HPV in all circumstances as infection can occur elsewhere but they can still help.

It is also recommended to get the HPV vaccine, which is also called Gardasil. The vaccine is not recommended as a treatment for HPV infection but rather is indicated for prevention. The HPV vaccine covers the 9 most dangerous strains of HPV that are most likely to cause warts and cancers. The vaccine is a 3-dose series given over a period of 6 months and is approved for both boys and girls starting at age 9 and approved up to 45 years old for men and women if they have not previously received it.

While pap smears are used for cervical cancer screening and test for HPV after 30 years old, HPV is not typically tested in younger women or men. Men typically only know if they have HPV if they develop genital warts. Most people with HPV do not know they have the infection.