

African American Women

and HPV

HPV, or human papillomavirus, is one of the most common sexually transmitted diseases in America today.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), by age 50, at least 80 percent of women will have acquired a genital HPV infection.

What is HPV?

HPV is an infection that affects skin and mucous membranes, and can cause warts, both in the genital area and on the hands and feet. It is transmitted through direct skin-to-skin contact with an infected individual – usually through sexual contact – and warts or other symptoms do not need to be present for it to be transmitted.

Currently, up to 20 million Americans have some form of HPV. There is no known cure for the infection.

There are many types of HPV, and not all of them are dangerous. Some, however, are known to cause cervical cancer, as well as cancer of the vagina, vulva and penis.

Often there are no symptoms for this illness, which is why knowledge is vital in preventing and treating it.

Prevention and Treatment

Cervical cancer – and some forms of HPV – can be prevented by receiving the HPV vaccine or by getting regular Pap tests.

There are currently two vaccines on the market, Cervarix® and Gardasil®, which can protect against the types of HPV that can lead to cervical cancer. The vaccines are given in a series of three shots and are most effective if given before you become sexually active. The recommended age to receive the vaccine is ages 11 to 12, although children as young as nine and adults as old as 26 may be vaccinated.

The HPV vaccine is not only recommended for girls. The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices advises that boys ages 11 to 12 years old should also receive the HPV vaccine.

HPV infections cause cancer in 7,000 men each year. That number – as well as the number of women who obtain HPV through sexual contact – can be greatly reduced by having boys vaccinated as well.

Most insurance companies cover the cost of the vaccine, including Medicaid and Health Choice. Federal vaccination programs, such as Vaccines for Children, are available to cover the cost of all three doses for uninsured children.

Regular Pap tests can also prevent HPV from causing cervical cancer. By getting a regular Pap test, your physician can find and treat any abnormal cells before they turn into cancer. The CDC warns that six in ten cervical cancers occur in women who have never had a Pap test.

Women should receive their first Pap test at age 21, or within three years of becoming sexually active. They should continue being tested every two to three years, depending on age and risk factors. Ask your physician how often you should be tested. Women who have received the HPV vaccine should still receive regular Pap tests.

African Americans and Cervical Cancer

Nearly 2,000 African American women are diagnosed with cervical cancer each year. Forty percent of those women will die from the disease. In fact, African American women have a lower five-year survival rate for cervical cancer than any other ethnicity. Yet, they are 30 percent less likely to receive the HPV vaccine, compared to whites.

One study indicated that 67.5 percent of African American women have never even heard of HPV. Yet the disease is spreading. Talk to your friends and family about HPV, and talk to your physician about your risks. Take a moment to get the facts to help prevent the spread of this disease.

For more information on HPV, or on how you can obtain free or low-cost Pap testing, contact the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program at (800) CDC-INFO.

