



HPV common, but knowledge of it still is not

Young adults especially at risk of getting virus

By Martha Irvine
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Nearly every working day, Dr. Elizabeth Poynor encounters anxious young women who come to her New York office with an HPV diagnosis.

The human papillomavirus is the most prevalent sexually transmitted disease—so common that researchers estimate most people will have some form of it in their lifetime. Young adults are especially at risk because they tend to be the most sexually active group.

Yet Poynor finds that most of her young patients, even if they have heard of a new vaccine aimed at preventing the worst kinds of HPV, know little about the virus and the harm it can do.

Many women find themselves scrambling to understand HPV after a routine Pap smear determines they have it. That, Poynor and others say, creates angst that could be avoided with more education.

"This is a very common problem, period," Poynor, a gynecological oncologist in private practice, says of HPV. "That's the first thing I try to tell my patients, to put their minds at ease."

There are many reasons HPV is so little known. Poynor thinks it's been overshadowed by higher-profile STDs, such as HIV and herpes. Others note that, when marketing its vaccine, pharmaceutical company Merck & Co. has focused on the potential for cervical cancer rather than the virus itself, which also can cause genital warts.

Then there's the gender divide. Both men and women can have high-risk HPV and low-risk types. But doctors say high-risk strains pose more problems for women, potentially leading not only to cervical cancer but to infertility.

Frequently, men are seen as the silent carriers who can unknowingly spread HPV to their sexual partners. And even when people know they have HPV, they often think condoms offer 100 percent protection; research has shown that they do not.

That was the case for one 24-year-old woman in San Francisco who recently learned she has one of the high-risk types of HPV. She was one of a few young women with HPV interviewed

for this story, all of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity.

"I was scared, sad, disappointed and definitely ashamed. It seemed unfair that I should have it when I've had relatively few partners," says the woman, who's been sexually active for eight years and had four monogamous partners, including her current boyfriend of two years.

She knew little about HPV at the time. But when her doctor uttered the word "precancer," in reference to the abnormal cells found in her cervix, she frantically searched the Internet to educate herself.

Certainly, doctors say, having more sexual partners increases a person's chance of contracting HPV. But, they say, HPV also can be contracted from just one partner and even one sexual encounter.

While some women who have HPV think it's too late for them to be vaccinated against HPV, some doctors say it still would be worth it, because it shields against the worst four types.

"Even if a young woman has one type of high-risk HPV, there's nothing to say that she cannot be infected with the other three," says Dr. Tina Tan, an infectious disease specialist at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago.

Federal officials recently recommended that girls as young as 9 receive the HPV vaccine. Some parents remain reluctant, though, because they are worried that the vaccine could be considered a license to have sex.

Dr. Gary Rose, head of the Medical Institute for Sexual Health in Austin, Texas, says parents should reconsider, even if they're certain their daughters will wait until marriage to have sex.

"There are a couple of things you can't be sure of," he tells those parents. "One is the sexual history of the person your daughter marries." The other is the risk of abuse or rape.

Because the vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV, Poynor and Tan say regular Pap smears and early treatment remain keys to fighting the virus. They agree, too, that some protection from condoms is better than none.

A young woman from San Antonio who was diagnosed with HPV two years ago also calls educating men about their role in spreading HPV "crucial."

"I had to tell my boyfriend about it," says the 26-year-old professional, "and he still doesn't get what it is."