



*Timely Matters: Human Papillomavirus/HPV/Genital Warts

Why is There So Much Interest in HPV?

Recently, there's been new interest in Human Papillomavirus (HPV). This interest stems from a newly understood connection between some HPV types and cervical cancer.

Also, a recent surge in local and state regulatory language associated with sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and especially HPV, has caught people's attention.

Clinical Aspects of HPV

HPV is an extremely common virus that causes warts and lesions. It has 100 subtypes. In childhood, HPV is often seen as warts on the fingers.

HPV is a virus which probably causes a life-long "infection". Long periods of dormancy or suppression are common. Some people also appear to get rid of the virus.

Most HPV appears to be site specific. In other words, one seldom sees genital warts in the mouth or plantar warts on the genitals.

Most HPV "infection" does not end up in disease and some disease will go away without treatment.

HPV infection often occurs early in one's sexual history and young females are more at risk due to the cellular make-up of the cervix.

Only a few strains are associated with cancer. Most external warts are not associated with cancers. However, some strains, such as number 16, are most closely associated with cervical cancer. It is important to remember that just because someone is infected with genital warts or ever has an abnormal Pap smear does not mean she

will get cervical cancer.

Clinical Management of External Warts

Warts can be left alone if they are small, but most people want to have them treated.

Warts can be burned off, frozen off, or less commonly lasered off.

Despite treatment, warts, including genital warts, have a high rate of reoccurrence.

A new product from 3M, Aldara or imiquimod, may remove the wart virus from tissue, lower the rate of reoccurrence, and make self treatment easier for infected individuals.

Clinical Management of Wart Lesions

Yearly pelvic exams and Pap smears for women are very important for the detection of warts and cervical cancer.

If a female's Pap result is irregular, a colposcopy, which is a way of looking at the cervix, and/or sub-typing of the warts may be recommended.

Just as in the management of external warts, internal warts can be frozen, lasered, or treated by a process called LEEP. However, Aldara cannot be used on the cervix.

Generally, internal HPV are very slow growing except in those with compromised immune systems such as persons infected with HIV.

Again, it's important to recognize that cervical cancer death is very rare in young women in the United States, but there are 4000 deaths per year in women of all ages.

What are the Health Education Implications?

Traditional abstinence messages may reduce but not eliminate infection risk for individuals. This is

because abstinence is generally considered absence of vaginal intercourse. However, HPV can possibly be spread through the fingers by touch.

Sexually transmitted disease education should begin in middle school by first teaching about viruses and bacteria and also by distinguishing between infection and disease.

Society should promote minimal or no sexual contact for those at highest risk, youth.

Condom information must be given so that youth and adults can make informed decisions about protecting themselves against HPV and other STIs.

Why not just scare people out of intercourse? Because HPV is a very common infection, perhaps

HPV infection often occurs early in one's sexual history and young females are most at risk.

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effecting more than 50% of the whole population. It would be irresponsible to marginalize, shame and guilt those who have it. Scaring and shaming people may cause infected individuals to delay or forgo treatment.

What about Condoms and HPV?

When condoms are used correctly and consistently, they will reduce, but not eliminate, the risk of HPV infection. Often condoms are put on too late, after there has been skin to skin contact. To increase protection, condoms must be put on before skin contact has been made, however, that still leaves touch by fingers.

Condoms are an important factor in protecting against cervical, penile and rectal cancer.

Protecting the cervix from HPV exposure is an important function of a condom.

While condoms don't eliminate the risk of infection, they are an important aspect of reducing the risk. Therefore, condom use should be promoted.

HPV Counseling Issues

Counseling the HPV infected individual is not simple. One must have knowledge of the virus; understand infection rates and implications for the infected and his or her partners; be able to listen to the patient's fears; effectively counsel the patient on risk reduction; and, often, treat the patient.

Patients often have the following questions and it is therefore important for the health care provider to be prepared to answer them:

- *How will I live with a life-long "infection"?*
- *How do I prevent infecting someone else?*
- *Should I avoid new relationships or marriage?*
- *Should I only have sex with someone who also has HPV?*
- *Does HPV have to be reported to the health department?*

Anticipating these commonly asked questions can help the health care provider be more prepared to deal with the patient in a helpful and healthful manner.

Summary

Medical research is probably 10 years away, at least, from a vaccine for HPV. Therefore, until a vaccine is available, society must figure out how to deal with a very common sexually transmitted infection in a sexually positive way.

References

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