

# SCMA health watch



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Health Tips from South Carolina's Doctors

## UNDERSTANDING HPV AND CERVICAL CANCER

### WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER?

Cervical cancer effects the cervix, which is the tip of the uterus. This form of cancer is the second most common in women, and accounts for 3,500 deaths in the United States each year.

### WHAT IS HPV?

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus that transmits itself through skin-to-skin contact, primarily through small breaks in the skin during sexual contact. HPV is the most common STD in the United States and 6.2 million new cases arise each year. The majority of infected people are between the ages of 15 and 24. There are over 100 strands of this virus. While some are less threatening and cause non-cancerous warts of the feet and hands, other HPV strands can infect the areas of the vagina, vulva and cervix. When these areas are affected, genital warts and cervical cancer can arise. Men are at risk too. The same HPV strands can cause genital warts, penile cancer and anal cancer in men. Although it can, HPV rarely causes cancer in the mouth, throat and sinuses.

### HOW DO CERVICAL CANCER AND HPV RELATE?

The majority of cervical cancers are formed by infection with HPV. The HPV infection turns normal cells into abnormal cells which, left untreated for several years, can lead to cervical cancer.

### SYMPTOMS

Unfortunately the only symptoms of HPV are genital warts and cervical dysplasia. The best way to know for sure if you have HPV is to continue receiving pap smears at your annual exam.

### TREATMENT

Fortunately, most HPV infections clear up on their own and do not lead to any related health problems. However, the following treatments are sometimes used for:

**Genital Warts:** Use of topical treatments or in-office visits to physically remove the warts.

**Mild Dysplasia:** A colposcopy will be performed and frequent pap smears will be recommended to closely monitor the infection.

**Severe Dysplasia:** Abnormal cells will be removed to prevent the development of cervical cancer.

### HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF?

- Avoid sexual contact with infected individuals
- Use protection since most people do not know they are infected
- Annual pap smears beginning at age 21, or 3 years after beginning sexual activity (there is no current test for detecting HPV in men)
- Vaccination

### HPV VACCINATION

The FDA approved a vaccine in June 2006 that protects girls against future infections of the 4 most common strains of HPV that cause genital warts and cervical cancer. Gardasil®, the vaccine, is given in a series of three vaccines over a course of six months. The vaccine cannot cause HPV infection and has shown to be 100% effective in a study of 20,000 women. The vaccine is recommended for females, ages 9-26 who have not been previously infected with HPV. Currently, studies for pregnant women, women over the age of 26 and men are being performed.



### Did you Know?

The use of regular pap smears has reduced the death rate by 70% over the past 50 years.

South Carolina ranks 8th in cervical cancer deaths when compared to other states in the US.

*Information provided by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

The purpose of the SCMA Health Watch program is to disseminate health information to the citizens of South Carolina and allow them to become more empowered in taking charge of their own health. To subscribe to this free publication please email [news@scmanet.org](mailto:news@scmanet.org) or call 1.800.327.1021. Please reproduce and distribute this information. When distributing this information in another format, please credit the South Carolina Medical Association.