



HPV and Cervical Cancer: What Your Clients Need to Know

Your clients look to you as the best source of information on Human Papillomavirus (HPV). Research shows that they want information on this important topic and they want to hear it from you. But what do your clients really need to know? And how can you best communicate this information?

Start with the basics.

All women need to know about the link between HPV and cervical cancer. HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the United States. Well over half of all sexually active men and women will have an HPV infection some time in their lives. There are over 100 types of HPV and over 30 of them are sexually transmitted.

- **Most types of HPV go away on their own** and cause no health problems.
- **Several types of HPV are high-risk.** These types can lead to cervical cancer in women. High-risk types of HPV can also cause less common cancers of the anus, penis, vagina, and vulva.
- **Other types of HPV (low-risk types) cause genital warts** in men and women. Having genital warts does not lead to cancer.

Explain how to prevent HPV.

Clients want to know what they can do to prevent HPV infection. Make sure they know that HPV is spread by genital skin-to-skin contact, especially during sex. Explain that a person can have HPV without knowing it and that you can't tell by looking at a person whether he or she has it. Your clients can lower their chances of getting HPV. Advise your clients to:

- **“Use condoms every time you have sex.”**
Let them know that condoms can protect some skin surfaces from coming in contact with the virus. Condoms have been shown to lower the chances of getting HPV. While not 100% effective, they do help.
- **“Have sex with only one person who only has sex with you.”**
Remind clients that the more people they or their partners have sex with, the more likely they will get HPV.
- **“Think about choosing not to have any sexual contact.”**
If there is no sexual contact at all, HPV infection is unlikely.

Make sure your clients know about the HPV vaccine.

Talk about other ways to prevent cervical cancer.

Make sure that your clients know how important it is to get regular Pap tests, starting 3 years from the age they become sexually active. Most of the nearly 10,000 women diagnosed every year with cervical cancer have either never had a Pap test, or have not had a Pap test in the last five years. And while the HPV vaccine will not prevent all cases of cervical cancer, regular Pap tests and follow-up care can prevent most other cases. Explain that:

- **The Pap test checks for changes in the cells of the cervix.** Sometimes, these changes can lead to cancer if not treated.
- **A woman can find out if she needs treatment by having a Pap test** and checking for these changes.
- **She can get treated early.** Early treatment will help protect her from cancer of the cervix.

Tell your client specifically how often she should come back to get a Pap test. In most cases, it will be at least every one to three years. Remind your client to get follow-up care if her Pap test is abnormal. Let her know what she can expect.

Use these practical tips for improving communication with your clients.

Remember that explaining these new concepts can mean life or death to your clients. When you talk to your client:

- **Use plain, non-medical language.**
Explain the facts to your client the way you would talk to a friend or family member.
- **Focus on the one or two most important facts your client needs to know.**
Think about what your client really needs to walk away knowing. Emphasize that.
- **Use the teach-back or show-me method.**
Make sure your clients understand. Ask them to repeat or show you what you've told them.
- **Encourage your clients to ask questions.**
Answer any questions your clients may have. Invite them to include a family member or friend if they would like. Be respectful, caring, and sensitive.
- **Give your clients easy-to-read handouts.**
Highlight key points you want them to remember.

Your knowledgeable and caring approach will make a big difference in the lives of your clients.

To find out more about HPV and cervical cancer, go to www.cdc.gov/std/hpv

