Dear Alice,

How can having multiple sex partners be a risk factor for cervical cancer? What is the difference between having sex with one man one thousand times and sex with one thousand men (not that I'm planning to!) one time?

? Curious

Answer

Dear Curious,

Whether you are in a strictly monogamous relationship or vying for notches on your bedpost, the underlying cause of cervical cancer is the human papillomavirus or HPV. Because HPV (a viral infection) may lead to cervical cancer, putting yourself at increased risk for HPV (like getting lots of action with a number of partners) may also increase your risk for developing cervical cancer.

The reason your risk of getting HPV increases along with the number of sexual partners you have is as follows: having sex with lots of different partners increases your chances of coming into contact with a person who is carrying the HPV virus. In other words, the probability of encountering an infected partner increases as the number of partners you have increases. On the other hand, having fewer sexual partners means you simply have fewer chances to get busy with a person that has an HPV (or any other infection). This is why having multiple sex partners is one of the risk factors for not just HPV, but other STIs as well, including HIV.

Being in a monogamous relationship is not necessarily a free pass. You can be a carrier of HPV without showing any symptoms and the HPV virus can have a long latency period in the body. And even if you only have one sexual partner, if that partner has HPV, it’s possible they may give HPV to you. The only way for a woman to be positive she is HPV-free is to have regular Pap smears, where your health care provider can check your cervix for abnormal cell growth (unfortunately, there is no equivalent screening for men). Planned Parenthood is also a good resource for Pap smears and STI testing.
Condom use is one of the best ways to reduce your risk for getting HPV and other STIs. Because HPV is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, using condoms does not guarantee protection against HPV, as there may be some skin contact that condoms don't cover. But chances of HPV infection are drastically reduced by wrapping it up.

There are also vaccines available to protect against certain strains of HPV that are linked to genital warts and cervical cancer. For more information on this cervical cancer vaccine, take a look at [HPV vaccine for genital warts and cervical cancer](https://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/09882) in the *Go Ask Alice!* archives.

Wherever your sexual escapades take you, using condoms (and, for women, getting regular Pap smears) will help you stay off the HPV bandwagon, thus greatly reducing your risk for cervical cancer.

Alice!

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