Dear Alice,

I have read a lot about HPV. I have read that most strains clear within two years. Does this mean that the genital warts associated with the virus will clear also? I understand that it is types 6 and 11 of the HPV virus that cause warts and that they are low-risk types. Is this also true?

Answer

Dear Reader,

A well-informed person is often well equipped to protect themselves, and you certainly seem to be well-informed. You are right that, in many cases, HPV symptoms disappear on their own within two years. Research has shown, for example, that 90 percent of women with cervical HPV have no visible symptoms after two years. One study even suggested that many symptoms can clear within six months. But just because someone has no symptoms doesn't mean that the virus itself has also cleared from the body. In some cases your body may have developed antibodies that suppress HPV to the point that it is undetectable on tests, or may have at least suppressed any symptoms of HPV, however the virus may still technically be present.

One of the difficulties of HPV is that some people have no symptoms, so it's difficult to tell whether someone has the virus or not, even if s/he is wart-free. For this reason it's also difficult to tell if someone is contagious.

You're also right that two particular strains of HPV - called types 6 and 11 - are low-risk for cervical or anal cancer, yet they can cause visible warts on the genitals. Types 6 and 11 are in fact responsible for most visible genital warts, however other strains can sometimes cause warts as well. Also, it's possible for a person to be infected with more than one strain of HPV at the same time.
Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can cause warts to appear on the genitals (and sometimes other parts of the body as well). The virus can also be present in the body with no symptoms at all (which is common with many STIs). More than 100 different strains of HPV exist and around 30 of them can be sexually transmitted to and from the genitals. Some of these 30+ strains are referred to as high-risk and can lead to cervical and anal dysplasia and/or cancer. Other HPV strains that are not likely to cause pre-cancerous or cancerous lesions are designated as low-risk.

Because strains of the virus can be asymptomatic (meaning they cause no symptoms), health care providers generally focus on treating the lesions caused by the virus when/if they appear and looking out for warning signs of cervical and anal cancer. A test called a Pap smear helps a provider identify irregular and possibly dangerous cells on a woman’s cervix. Fortunately, there a several vaccines (approved by the Food and Drug Administration) that can prevent HPV infection. For more information on these vaccines, take a look at HPV vaccine for genital warts and cervical cancer [2] in the Go Ask Alice! archives.

If you're concerned about HPV, cervical, or anal cancer, and/or the general sexual health of you and/or your partner(s), a discussion with your health care provider would be the place to start. For more info on HPV, check out the related Q&As. In the meantime, using condoms and other safer sex techniques can go a long way toward reducing the risk of STIs for you and your partner(s).

Keeping on top of your sexual health can help keep you in tip-top shape in the bedroom. What incentive to keep yourself informed!

Alice!
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