Dear Alice,
I was diagnosed with HPV three years ago, it has since cleared — become undetectable. Since being tested and learning that I had HPV, I'd been in relationships and told my partners prior to having sex that I had it and we always used condoms. The last pap I got showed that the virus had become undetectable. I'm currently single and what I'm wondering is, if I have casual sex (with a condom, of course), do I have to tell the person that I've tested positive for HPV?

Answer

Dear Reader,
You've posed an interesting and complicated question. While you're right that an HPV (human papilloma virus) infection may become undetectable or clear on its own, it's hard to know for sure if it's truly “gone.” Using a condom during casual sex can definitely reduce the risk of passing HPV to your partner(s), but it's not guaranteed. For this reason, honesty is always important in any type of sexual relationship.

Healthcare providers firmly advise disclosure when it comes to STIs like gonorrhea or chlamydia, but disagree on the necessity of sharing your HPV status with a sexual partner or significant other. Some advocate for disclosure as a general rule, while others suggest talking to partners only when infections are symptomatic (i.e., you have visible genital warts). But even though the health benefit of HPV disclosure isn't clear, there are other reasons why telling partners about your past HPV diagnosis might be a good idea.

Honest communication is crucial to relationships, even casual ones, and talking about HPV could reduce the stigma surrounding this extremely common sexually transmitted infection (STI). Along the same lines, opening up a discussion about your sexual health history may prompt your partner to do the same. Talking with your partner(s) could also be a learning opportunity — for example, maybe s/he doesn't know about the vaccines Gardasil and Cervarix [2], which can protect both men and women against several HPV strains. Also, having an open conversation might end up being a stress reliever for your partner(s) — nearly all sexually active adults have had at least one type of HPV at some point in their lives.

If you aren't sure how to broach the subject with your partner(s), you can find some helpful
suggestions in How to tell partner about herpes [3]. Good luck!

Alice!
Category:
Sexual & Reproductive Health [4]
Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI's) [5]
Genital Warts, HPV, & Condyloma [6]

Related questions

How to tell partner about herpes [7]
HPV vaccine for genital warts and cervical cancer [8]
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