

WHAT IF MY PAP SMEAR IS ABNORMAL?

Abnormal Pap smears are usually caused by a virus called human papilloma virus (HPV). This virus is spread by close physical contact. HPV may cause genital warts, which either may appear similar to warts you see on someone's hands or feet or may be invisible (especially in areas you can't see, like the cervix). Abnormal Pap smears may take months or years to show up after exposure to an infected person, so it is not always obvious who infected you with HPV.

Why Is HPV Important?

HPV is the most common STD in America, even though people don't talk about it much. In women, HPV can infect the cervix and cause abnormal cells to grow on it; this shows up as an abnormal Pap smear. If these cells are allowed to keep growing, they may lead to cancer of the cervix.

What Happens If You Have an Abnormal Pap Smear?

If you have a vaginal infection, the cells on your cervix may look unusual, which is reported as "atypia" on a Pap smear. You may be treated with antibiotics or creams, and then have another Pap smear done in 3 months to see whether the abnormal cells are gone.

If 2 Pap smears in a row show atypia, or one Pap smear shows any other, more serious, abnormal cells, a **colposcopy** will be scheduled. This is similar to a Pap smear; your doctor will put a speculum in your vagina and then put Q-tips soaked in vinegar water on your cervix. The vinegar makes abnormal cells look white. Then, your doctor will look at your cervix with a microscope. If any areas look serious, your doctor may take a biopsy (a very small piece of your cervix), which allows the doctor to look closely for precancerous cells (which could lead to cancer if not treated).

A biopsy usually feels like a pinch, with some cramping possible afterwards. Your doctor will talk to you about different types of treatment if any problems are found. The goal of Pap smears and colposcopy is to find abnormal cells before they turn into cancer, so they can be treated.

Protecting Yourself:

- **ALWAYS** use condoms when you have sex.
- Abstinence is the only 100% effective way to avoid STDs.
- Limit your partners. People with more than one partner over a year are at greater risk for getting STDs and cancer of the cervix.
- Get regular checkups and yearly Pap smears. Discovering abnormal cells early may prevent you from getting cancer.