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HPV (Human Papillomavirus): FRANK TALK **What we do – and don't – know**

What is HPV? Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a virus that is passed through close contact. Out of the 100 plus identified types of HPV, 40 affect the genital-rectal area.

How is it spread? The most common way HPV is spread is through sexual intercourse. Penetrative sex is NOT required for transmission. HPV can be spread through digital-genital contact, oral-genital contact, by sharing sex toys, or through close contact with moist warm areas such as shared shower benches. This type of transmission is much less common than sexual contact, but you should be aware of this and take precautions as necessary.

How common is HPV? HPV infections are common. Studies of college students with no sexual history prior to enrollment found that 30% of them become HPV positive within one year after engaging in sexual intercourse for the first time. This statistic rises to 66% of sexually active individuals over the course of several years.

Do condoms prevent HPV? One year studies have shown that the consistent use of condoms decreases transmission rates from 89% to 38%. Using condoms regularly reduces, but does not eliminate, the risk of HPV transmission.

What happens after an infection? A woman's immune system normally clears the HPV virus, and the infection goes away by itself. However, some types of HPV cause genital warts and/or abnormal PAP smears. Only 10% of HPV infections persist more than 3 years. Those that don't go away after 3 years are more likely to cause cervical cancer. If untreated, HPV can also go on to cause cancer of the vulva, rectum, or penis.

How can I prevent HPV? There is a HPV vaccination to protect young women from the most common HPV types. It is offered to women ages 9-26. Testing is currently being done to approve the vaccine for young men, and hopefully a vaccination will soon be developed for older adults who are initiating new sexual relationships.

Aside from vaccination the best strategies to limit the likelihood of HPV transmission involve being careful; using methods like abstinence, limiting partners, using condoms, and being cautious in shared environments.

Smoking doubles the risk of HPV persisting! Ask for help to quit.

Does HPV go away? We don't know. Some people may clear HPV totally while others may develop a low-level detectable "latent" infection that may activate again under

conditions of immune suppression, stress, or during pregnancy. It is similar to people who had chicken-pox later developing shingles. This is the most probable cause of HPV in long-time monogamous couples.

Can doctors tell if an older person has a new or old, reactivated infection? NO. We can only tell if someone is infected with HPV. There is no test available for the length of the infection.

How long does the virus shed & transmit infections? After 2 years 80% of infections are cleared. After 3 years 91% of infections are cleared. However, it is not unusual to clear one type of HPV and then get infected with another type.

What about pregnancy if I or my partner has HPV? We do not know the rate of mother to baby transmission. Random studies of all babies show that 6% of babies are HPV positive at birth. This rises to 13% at 6 weeks and then goes away. These infections are passing and of no clinical significance.