Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and Cancer of the Cervix

What is HPV?
- HPV is a family of viruses that is very common.
- HPV can pass between two people, mostly through sexual contact.
- HPV is found in and around the genital organs (the penis, vagina, anus, etc.).
- Some HPV types can cause ordinary and genital warts, but rarely cause cancer.
- Other HPV types can cause cancer of the cervix.

What is the link between HPV and cancer of the cervix?
- Most women who have been exposed to HPV do not develop cancer of the cervix.
- Strong body defenses (immune system) can fight off most viruses, including HPV.
- The HPV infection usually goes away by itself.
- A few HPV types can cause cell changes in the cervix (infections) that may slowly lead to cancer if they are not found and treated.

How does someone get HPV?
- HPV is very common - studies show that about 3 out of 4 people who have had sex have been exposed to some type of HPV at some time.
- The virus can pass between two people, mostly through sexual contact.
- Condoms offer some protection, but HPV may be present on skin that is not covered.

How do I know if I have an HPV type that is linked to cancer of the cervix?
- Usually there are no symptoms and people do not know they have HPV.
- The only way to know if you have HPV is by having an HPV test. The HPV test is done using a Pap test sample. It can find HPV types that cause cancer of the cervix.
- You can ask your doctor for an HPV test when you book your Pap test. The HPV test is not covered by OHIP.

Are there treatments?
- Your own body's defenses (immune system) will often fight off HPV.
- There are treatments for cell changes in the cervix (infections) that are caused by HPV. These changes will show up on your Pap test. Your doctor or healthcare provider will discuss your choices, including treatment.
- If you have genital warts that do not go away, talk to your doctor or nurse about treatment options.
What things increase the risk of developing cancer of the cervix from HPV infection:
• Smoking or exposure to smoke.
• Having another sexually transmitted infection, such as chlamydia or herpes simplex virus 2.
• Having a weakened immune system, for example, from HIV, chemotherapy or organ transplant.
• Recent studies also suggest women may be at increased risk for HPV if they have:
  - used oral contraceptives (birth control pills) for more than 5 years.
  - had 5 or more full-term pregnancies.

How can I help reduce my risk of HPV infection?
• If you are sexually active, it is hard to prevent exposure to HPV.
• If you are young, delay having sex until late teens. Exposure to HPV through sexual contact at a young age seems to increase the risk of cancer of the cervix.
• Limit your number of sexual partners. You may have a greater chance of getting cancer of the cervix if you have had a number of sexual partners, or if your partner has had a number of partners.
• Protect yourself from other sexually transmitted infections by using condoms.
• Avoid tobacco smoke. Smoking increases the risk of cancer of the cervix in women infected with HPV.
• It is important to take care of your immune system by eating well (follow Canada's Food Guide), exercising regularly, managing stress and getting enough rest.

Coping with HPV
• Finding out that you have HPV may be upsetting. It is important to remember that HPV is very common.
• Tell your partner that you have HPV. If needed, suggest treatment for genital warts.
• Most importantly, remember to follow through on your treatment plan.

For more information about cancer of the cervix talk to your doctor or nurse, contact the Canadian Cancer Society at 1.888.939.3333, or visit:
www.cancercare.on.ca/prevention_cervicalscreening.htm
www.cancer.ca    www.alphaweb.org

Regular Pap Tests Can Prevent Cancer of the Cervix