

sex talk.

answers to your questions about sex and relationships

wildfact

HPV is one of the three most common STDs seen in UA students (the other two are chlamydia and herpes).

Q I have a question re: the meaning of an “abnormal papsmear.” Doesn’t this result have the potential to mean a number of things, i.e. that a woman may have an STD, or has tested positive for HPV?

A. You are correct. Having an “abnormal papsmear” can mean many different things. A Pap test (named after Greek scientist Dr. Georgios Papanikolaou) is a test done during a pelvic exam by a medical provider. The test, which screens for cervical cancer, is one of the most reliable and effective cancer screening tests available. A small sample of cells is gently collected from the cervix (at the opening to a woman’s uterus) with a very tiny brush and placed in a vial. Within minutes, the cells are viewed on a microscope slide for the presence of anything unusual. The vial is then sent to a laboratory for further testing which takes a week or more.

Conditions that might be called “abnormal” include an overgrowth (or undergrowth) of yeast cells, evidence of irritation from recent intercourse or tampon use, the presence of white blood cells (indicating a current infection), or abnormal cell growth that is termed “dysplasia.” Dysplasia (from the Greek “dys” meaning abnormal or impaired, and “plasia” meaning cell growth) may also

be categorized as SIL (squamous intraepithelial lesion) or CIN (cervical intraepithelial neoplasm).

Because it is a screening tool, a Pap test alone cannot be used for definitive diagnosis. An “abnormal” result identifies those women who need further testing to identify what is happening on and around the cervix. Abnormal cell growth is almost always caused by HPV (Human Papilloma Virus) and will usually get better without any treatment at all. Regular Pap tests allow women to monitor their health and be treated early (IF treatment is needed) before abnormal cells turn into anything serious (i.e. cervical cancer).

Testing guidelines have recently changed. According to the Centers for Disease Control, women should start getting regular Pap tests at age 21 or within three years of first sexual intercourse – whichever happens first. The American Congress of Gynecology and Obstetrics advises women under 30 to have a Pap test every 2 years.

