

# Elusive STD epidemic primarily affects women

## HPV leading cause of cervical cancer in women

MOLLY HANDLER

STAFF WRITER

The most common sexually transmitted disease is becoming an epidemic, but most symptoms are undetectable.

The virus, called human papillomavirus, or HPV, has already affected over 20 million Americans, according to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease. This virus is the leading cause of cervical cancer in women. However, regular Pap smears can prevent HPV from turning into cervical cancer.

"The incidence of HPV infection in sexually active young college women is alarming. Furthermore, we currently have no effective way to prevent infection," said Penny Hitchcock, chief of the sexually transmitted diseases branch in NIAID's Division of Microbiology and Infectious Diseases in a press release.

According to the American Social Health Organization, most sexually active people have been in contact with HPV, however, most do not develop symptoms.

The most common symptoms of HPV are genital warts and abnormal cell changes. Abnormal cell changes in a woman can only be detected through a Pap smear.

There are over 100 strands of this virus, with only a few causing genital warts. Thirty types of HPV can be spread by sexual contact according to the NIAID fact-sheet. HPV can also be spread through skin-on-skin contact, such as kissing.

Physician Gregory S. Henderson, a partner with the Wilmington Pathology Association, recently spoke at UNCW about HPV in women. Henderson said HPV causes 98 percent of all cervical cancer, which is the second leading cause of death in women.

Men, as well as women, can be affected by HPV, Dr. Henderson said. There is no test for the virus in men, however. Most people exposed to HPV kill it with their immune system. A study done by the NIAID supports evidence that women are just more susceptible to being diagnosed

with the disease.

"Women bare the brunt of this disease," Dr. Henderson said.

He has treated women who died from cervical cancer due to HPV. However, many of these women were unaware of a problem.

"Until we have more precise diagnostic tests, it is important for young women to have regular Pap smears," Hitchcock said.

Henderson echoed this advice in his lecture. He also said that women who know they have HPV need to take special precautions, like quitting smoking. Henderson

said that studies have shown that women who smoke may be more susceptible to cervical cancer.

Henderson is currently working on a Web site with information about HPV, [www.HPVFoundation.org](http://www.HPVFoundation.org), which will be available soon. More information about HPV can be found at [www.nih.niaid.gov](http://www.nih.niaid.gov). The Student Health Center at 962-3386 can also assist students with concerns about HPV.

UNCW journalism student Cary Farris contributed to this story.


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