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Health WIHS

TO COLPO OR NOT TO COLPO, IT'S ALL ABOUT THE PAP

By Sandra Micci, MS, PA-C and Stewart Massad, M.D.

The Papanicolaou smear or Pap is a necessary and important screening for all ladies. It is vital to our health as women. A Pap smear is a common test used to screen all women for cervical pre-cancer or cancer. A Pap smear is done at each WIHS visit to examine cells shed from the surface of the cervix and the inner cervix called the endo-cervical canal. This is done during the WIHS pelvic exam, and the sample is sent to a laboratory for evaluation. A Pap smear is read by a system called the Bethesda Reporting System and an abnormal result is defined as atypical, low-grade, high-grade or cervical cancer. Most abnormal PAP smears are not due to cancer but are caused by infections like Human papillomavirus (HPV) or low estrogen levels.

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a significant risk factor for cervical cancer along with others such as a history of multiple sexual partners, low socioeconomic status, use of tobacco, and a weakened immune system like being HIV (+). Women who smoke cigarettes are at higher risk of developing cervical cancer because cigarette smoking & HPV infection increase the risk of developing high-grade lesions. Women who are HIV (+) have a four to five times higher risk of cancer and pre-cancers of the cervix than HIV (-) women do. Also an HIV (+) woman is more likely to have persistent HPV infections. That is why we perform a Pap smear every six months with your WIHS visit.

In order to perform a good Pap smear, we ask you to avoid scheduling your WIHS study visit during your menstrual period along with avoiding vaginal medications or products, douching, sexual intercourse or tampons in the vagina 48 hours prior to the Pap smear. We ask this of you in order to obtain the most representative cellular sample for your Pap smear and to avoid false negative results. We want the best Pap smear, so we can take the best care of you.

There are two ways to do a Pap test. When WIHS began, there was only one: smearing cells on a glass slide. During the late 1990s, a second type was developed, involving swishing the Pap sample in a jar of liquid, then running the liquid through a filtration machine. WIHS investigators decided not to switch so we could compare results from the beginning of the study with those at the end. Although early studies supported by the manufacturers of liquid-based tests suggested these were better, recent studies have shown that the two ways are equally effective in finding precancers and preventing cervical cancer.

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So what happens if your Pap smear is abnormal? If your Pap smear is abnormal, then you will need further evaluation with a procedure called a colposcopy. The WIHS study uses colposcopies when a woman has an abnormal Pap smear to rule out increased risk of cervical or vaginal cancer. The WIHS study does not use HPV DNA testing because there is no consensus as to performing HPV testing routinely in HIV (+) women.

A colposcopy is a diagnostic procedure that allows the provider to see an illuminated, magnified view of the cervix, vagina and vulvar tissue. A colposcopic evaluation of the cervix & vagina allows for distinguishing normal from abnormal areas by looking for changes in color, contour and vascular patterns after vinegar is applied with a swab. If an abnormality is seen during the colposcopy, then a biopsy is taken of the area most abnormally appearing to make a definitive diagnosis of cervical &/or vaginal dysplasia. The primary goal is to identify precancerous and cancerous spots so that our women can be treated early. The management for dysplastic tissue may be a treatment procedure or close follow-up with repeat PAP smears.

Treating precancers can prevent cancers, which can be fatal, especially in women with HIV. Only 3 women in WIHS got cervical cancer during the first 10 years of the study—a remarkable achievement thanks to the WIHS women's determination to get preventive care. Treatment for dysplasia involves destroying the cervical or vaginal lining or vulvar skin involved. Most treatments are minor and are done in clinic, though some are done in outpatient operating rooms.

So to Colpo or not to Colpo? It's all about the Pap.

“Did you Know...”

By Angie Shansky



- ★ Our eyes are always the same size from birth
- ★ In 1900, a person could expect to live to be 47. Today, the average life expectancy for men and women in developed countries is longer than 70 years
- ★ The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was established in May 1927 as a non-profit corporation to promote the art of movie making. In the first year, the Academy had 36 members, with Douglas Fairbanks Sr as president. The first Academy Awards, now better known as the Oscars, were presented at a private dinner in the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, with less than 250 persons attending. Today, the Academy has over 6 000 honorary members - the Oscar Awards are viewed by more than a billion people on television.
- ★ Roberta Flack was given a scholarship to attend Howard University at age 15. Flack made her mark as a teacher in the D.C. Public school system and supplemented her salary by singing in local restaurants, such as Mr. Henry's on Capitol Hill.

