

Mount Sinai Oncologist Monica Prasad-Hayes answers questions about the link between vulvar and vaginal cancers and HPV infection and why these cancers are on the rise.

Q: How common are cancers of the vagina and the vulva?

A: Cancers of the vagina and the vulva (the area of skin that surrounds the opening for urination, including the clitoris and labia) are the least common of gynecologic cancers, but they do occur. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about six to seven percent of gynecologic cancers are vaginal and vulvar cancers. The American Cancer Society's estimates for 2011 are 4,340 new cases of vulvar cancer with 940 deaths and 2,570 new cases of vaginal cancer with 780 deaths.

Q: To what do you attribute the increasing number of vaginal and vulvar cancers?

A: The HPV (human papillomavirus) is more prevalent now than ever before and there is more testing available for the HPV viruses that dysplasia and cancer. Most HPV infections go away on their own, but for some, the infection causes cell changes and increases the risk of cancer in the future. Gardasil® and Cervarix® vaccinations can prevent vulvar and vaginal cancers caused by the most common HPV types. Other preventive vaccinations are under study.

Q: How is HPV spread?

A: HPV is spread by skin-to-skin contact, vaginal and anal intercourse, as well as oral sex, which are the causes of most cases in young women. HPV is thought to be responsible for nearly all cervical cancers, most anal and vaginal cancers, and some vulvar, penile, throat, and mouth cancers. HPV weakens the immune system and may make you more susceptible to infections.

Q: What are the symptoms of vulvar and vaginal cancer?

A: The most common symptoms of vulvar cancer are itching and pain. In the case of vulvar cancer, a lump or sore causes the symptoms and it doesn't go away. Other possible symptoms include unusual bleeding or discharge, a change in bathroom habits, blood in the urine or stool, urinary frequency, pain in the pelvis or abdomen, especially when passing urine or having sex, and color changes on the skin of the vulva. Vulvar cancer most often occurs on the inner edges of the labia.

Vaginal cancer often does not cause early symptoms, but if any of the following occur, a doctor should be consulted: pain and discharge or bleeding not related to menstruation, pain during sexual intercourse, pain in the pelvic area, or a lump in the vagina.

Q: What are the risk factors for vulvar and vaginal cancer?

A: Exposure to HPV increases the risk for vaginal and vulvar cancer, even if a woman has had a hysterectomy. In women who have had a hysterectomy, vaginal cancer may represent an earlier

spread from the cervix. Smoking increases HPV virulence, and is associated with higher risk of transformation to cancer.

Q: At what age are most vulvar and vaginal cancers diagnosed?

A: They can occur at any age, but are most often diagnosed in older women. Less than 20 percent of cases are women under 50 years of age. The earlier that vulvar cancer is diagnosed (i.e. the smaller the affected area), the less likely that an extensive surgery will be needed. When vaginal and vulvar cancers are found early, they are most often curable.

Q: What, if anything, can be done to prevent vaginal or vulvar cancers?

A: Not smoking; using condoms; limiting the number of sexual partners; taking the HPV vaccine (if between the ages of 9 and 26) after talking with a doctor, nurse or health professional about it; and regular gynecologic checkups for all ages, even for very young women if they are sexually active.

Q: What kind of doctor treats vulvar and vaginal cancers?

A: These cancers need to be treated by a gynecologic oncologist. This is a surgeon who is specially trained in the diagnosis and treatment of gynecologic cancers.

If you have been diagnosed with vaginal or vulvar cancer, we can help. Contact a Mount Sinai gynecologic oncologist at 212-241-1111

If you would like more information about HPV or other sexually transmitted diseases, please call us at 212-241-7952.