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Gynecology

## HPV – Human Papillomaviruses

### Main Cause of Cervical Cancer

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Human papillomaviruses (HPV) are among the most important pathogens in gynecological oncology. Worldwide, they are the main cause of the development of cervical cancer. The aim of this article is to present the current status of HPV in gynecology, to shed light on prevention and diagnostic strategies and to point out gaps in care.

### Women's Health and Gynecology

Women's health encompasses much more than the treatment of gynecological diseases – it is a holistic concept that focuses on physical, mental and social aspects of women's health. Gynecology, medically referred to as gynaecology, is the specialist area that deals with the prevention, diagnosis and therapy of women-specific diseases as well as support in all phases of life. A central topic is cancer prevention. Breast and cervical cancer are among the most common cancers in women. Many tumors can be detected early and successfully treated through preventive examinations. The introduction of HPV vaccination has significantly reduced the risk of cervical cancer, as almost all cases are caused by human papillomaviruses.

## **Cervical Cancer**

Cervical cancer is one of the most common cancers in women worldwide. In Germany, around 4,600 women are diagnosed with it every year, and about 1,200 die as a result. The main cause is persistent infection with certain types of human papillomaviruses that are transmitted through sexual contact. High-risk HPV types, which cause changes to the cervix and can lead to cancer for years, are particularly dangerous. The disease develops insidiously and often remains asymptomatic in the early stages. Only in the advanced stage can unusual bleeding, pain in the lower abdomen or discharge occur. Therefore, cancer screening at the gynecologist is crucial.

Tests make it possible to detect cell changes at an early stage. From the age of 20, women are recommended to have an annual Pap test, and from the age of 35 a combined Pap and HPV test every three years. In the case of abnormal findings, colposcopy or biomarker tests can provide clarity. The most important preventive measure is the HPV vaccination. It should be done before the first sexual contact, protects against the most dangerous types of HPV and reduces the risk of cervical cancer by up to 90%. Catch-up vaccinations up to the age of 17 are also useful. Studies show that vaccinated women are significantly less likely to develop cervical cancer. The chances of recovery are very good if diagnosed early – over 90% of those affected survive the first five years after diagnosis. If the cancer is detected late, the survival rate drops significantly.

## **Human Papillomaviruses**

Human papillomaviruses are a large group of viruses that can affect people of all ages. So far, more than 200 different types of HPV are known.

### **HPV Types**

- Low-risk types: Can cause benign changes such as genital warts. Examples are HPV 6 and 11.
- High-risk types: Are carcinogenic and can lead to malignant cell changes. The most important representatives are HPV 16, 18, 31, 33 and 45.

### **Transmission Routes**

HPV is usually transmitted through sexual contact. Even skin-to-skin contact in the genital area can lead to infection. Condoms do not provide complete protection, but they do reduce the risk. Transmission from mother to child during childbirth is less common. Infections in the mouth and throat can be caused by oral sex.

### **Course and Symptoms**

Most HPV infections are asymptomatic and heal on their own within 1-2 years. The immune system eliminates the viruses in most cases. If an infection persists, cell changes can develop that can lead to cancer after years or decades. Common consequences are genital warts as well as precancerous lesions and cancer (especially cervical cancer, but also cancer of the vulva, vagina, penis, anus, mouth and throat).

### **Diagnostics**

HPV infections are usually detected by a smear test as part of the gynecological check-up. The Pap test shows cell changes, while the HPV test detects the virus. If there are abnormal findings, further examinations follow.

### **Prevention**

The most important measure for the prevention of HPV-related diseases is vaccination. In Germany, the STIKO recommends HPV vaccination for girls and boys between the ages of 9-14. The vaccination protects against the most important high-risk types and significantly reduces the risk of cervical cancer and other HPV-associated cancers.

### **Therapy Plan**

#### **Watchful Waiting**

For most HPV infections, a watchful attitude with check-ups is sufficient, as the immune system usually eliminates the viruses on its own. Only if cell changes are detected are further measures necessary.

#### **Treatment of Genital Warts**

Genital warts are usually caused by low-risk HPV types. They can be removed locally, for example by freezing (cryotherapy), laser therapy, electrocautery, surgically and by applied drugs such as Imiquimod or Podophyllotoxin.

#### **Treatment of Cell Changes**

If abnormal cell changes are detected by Pap or HPV tests, a colposcopy with tissue removal (biopsy) is performed. If precancerous lesions (e.g. CIN 2/3) are confirmed, removal of the altered tissue is necessary – by conization. In this way, the development of cancer can be prevented in most cases.

#### **Therapy for Advanced Findings**

If it is already a tumor, surgery, radiation or chemotherapy are used, depending on the stage. The treatment is adapted to the patient and coordinated in an interdisciplinary manner.

#### **Support From the Immune System**

A healthy lifestyle, avoiding smoking and a balanced diet strengthen the immune system and can promote healing. In the case of recurrent or persistent infections, immunomodulating drugs are used in individual cases.

#### **Aftercare**

After each treatment, follow-up examinations are important in order to detect a recurrence at an early stage.

### **Proper Nutrition for HPV**

A targeted diet can strengthen the immune system and support the body's own defense against HPV infections. Even though there is no such thing as an HPV diet, studies show that certain nutrients and a healthy lifestyle can reduce the risk of infections and cell changes.

#### **Nutrition tips**

- Fruits and vegetables: Rich in antioxidants, vitamins (A, C, E) and secondary plant compounds (phytochemicals). They protect the cells and support the immune system.
- Folic acid and vitamin B<sub>12</sub>: Play an important role in cell regeneration. Good sources are green leafy vegetables, legumes and whole grains.
- Selenium, zinc and iron: The trace elements are important for the immune system. They are contained, for example, in nuts, meat, fish, eggs and legumes.
- Omega-3 fatty acids: Have anti-inflammatory effects and are found in fatty fish, flaxseed and walnuts.
- Low sugar and processed foods: Can weaken the immune system and promote inflammatory processes.
- Drink enough water and unsweetened teas, maintain a normal body weight, avoid smoking and excessive alcohol consumption.

#### **Phytotherapy**

Phytotherapy, thus treatment with medicinal plants, is often used as a supplementary measure for HPV infections. It can strengthen the immune system, has an anti-inflammatory effect and supports the healing of the mucous membranes. There is no medicinal plant that directly eliminates an HPV infection – but some plant extracts can help reduce the risk of infections and cell changes.

#### **My top 4 medicinal plants for HPV are:**

- Green tea extract (*Camellia sinensis*): Is rich in polyphenols such as epigallocatechingallate (EGCG). Studies show that EGCG has an antiviral and antioxidant effect. In the case of genital warts, the extract is used medicinally (e.g. as an ointment) and can promote regression of the warts.
- *Echinacea* (coneflower): Strengthens the immune system. Extracts can support the body's own defenses and increase the likelihood of spontaneous healing of HPV infections.
- Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*): Contains curcumin, which has antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects. There is evidence that curcumin can inhibit the growth of HPV-infected cells.
- Celandine (*Chelidonium majus*): Used externally for warts. The yellow plant sap can help reduce viral warts.

Note that phytotherapy does not replace medical treatment. Some medicinal plants can have side effects or drug interactions. Therefore, they should be taken in consultation with the physician and selected by an expert in gynecology with additional phytotherapeutic qualifications.

## Mycotherapy

The use of medicinal mushrooms for therapeutic purposes is also becoming increasingly important for HPV infections. Medicinal mushrooms contain numerous bioactive substances such as polysaccharides, triterpenes and antioxidants, which strengthen the immune system and have an anti-inflammatory effect. They do not replace conventional medical treatment, but can be used as an adjunct to support the body's own defenses and reduce the risk of chronic HPV infections and cell changes. The intake should be coordinated with an experienced therapist, as interactions with medication are possible.



### My top 4 medicinal mushrooms for HPV are:

- *Coriolus versicolor* (turkey tail): One of the best-studied medicinal mushrooms for viral infections. Its polysaccharides (PSK, PSP) show immunomodulating and antiviral effects. Studies suggest that *Coriolus* supports the healing of HPV-related cell changes in the cervix.
- Reishi (*Ganoderma lucidum*): Mushroom of eternal life. It contains triterpenes and polysaccharides that stimulate the immune system and have an anti-inflammatory effect. Reishi can strengthen the body's own viral defenses and promote healing.
- Shiitake (*Lentinula edodes*): Contains lentinan, an active ingredient that activates the immune system. It is used to support viral infections and can improve the immune response against HPV.
- Maitake (*Grifola frondosa*): Is rich in immune-stimulating beta-glucans. It strengthens the body's defenses and fights viruses.

## TCM

Traditional Chinese Medicine offers an alternative approach to treatment. In TCM, HPV is not considered a virus in its own right, but rather as an expression of a disturbed balance in the body, especially of Qi (life energy), blood and organ functions. TCM therapies include acupuncture, herbal therapy, and dietary recommendations. The aim is to strengthen the immune system, dissipate humid heat and restore the balance between Yin and Yang.

Chinese medicinal herbs such as astragalus and schisandra are used to support the body's own defenses. Studies show that certain herbal mixtures improve the immune response and reduce the

viral load. Acupuncture can reduce stress and have a positive influence on the immune system. In addition, TCM advises a healthy lifestyle. Note: TCM does not replace conventional medical treatment, but can be used as an accompaniment to improve the quality of life. Close coordination with the attending physician is advisable.

## Conclusion

The human papillomavirus represents a major challenge in gynecology. In particular, the connection to cervical cancer and other anogenital tumors makes the confrontation with HPV a central topic. The introduction of HPV vaccination has led to a decline in HPV infections and precancerous lesions worldwide. Nevertheless, the vaccination coverage rate in many countries remains expandable.

In the future, education about vaccination will have to be even more important. Another step forward is the improvement of early detection. Screening programs make it possible to detect and treat HPV infections and the resulting cell changes at an early stage. Immunomodulating therapies or innovative approaches from personalized medicine could soon open up new possibilities. The aim is to further reduce HPV-related diseases and to offer affected women more safety and quality of life.

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