

# Sexually transmitted virus bears stigma, risk of cancer

■ The Health Center says HPV is by far the most common STD they see, though most students know very little about the virus

By Leon Tovey  
Oregon Daily Emerald

Melanie Johnson\* didn't know she had a sexually transmitted disease until her mother called her and told her.

The University senior said she thought human papillomavirus was just a run-of-the-mill thing like a yeast infection. No one at the University Health Center mentioned the words "genital warts" when they told her she had HPV in fall 1999.

"They told me I should take vitamins and watch my diet and get plenty of rest," Johnson said. "They never, ever, ever once said this was an STD."

Johnson said she was given a pap smear during spring 1999 at the Health Center, and the results came back "abnormal." She said she was told later that year about her HPV status, but she didn't know exactly what it was until after her mother researched the disease on the Internet.

"She got all these hits from sites talking about genital warts," Johnson said. "It was humiliating. The whole thing made me really upset."

Colleen Jones, the nurse practitioner at the Health Center who told Melanie about her HPV infection, said the humiliation Melanie felt typifies the response of most of the students she examines. HPV is by far the most common STD the Health Center deals with, and Jones said she usually spends about half her time

with patients explaining that testing positive for the virus is not the end of the world.

"I try to tell them to remember that they are the same person they were before they found out they have HPV," she said. "It's just a virus."

The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates between 50 and 75 percent of sexually active men and women will acquire HPV at some point in their lives, and 5.5 million people get a new genital HPV infection every year. Because the virus can be spread by skin-to-skin contact — unlike HIV and Hepatitis B, which are spread only through contact with bodily fluids — the only way to prevent infection is total abstinence.

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Melanie Johnson\*  
University student

nence. Condoms and other protective devices don't work because they don't cover all areas of contact.

HPV also differs from many other STDs in that in time it becomes "self-containing," and some research indicates that it eventually leaves the body completely.

While research has linked HPV to cervical, penile and anal cancer, Jones pointed out that while more than five million people get HPV every year, only 15,000 women develop cervical cancer each year. While 80 percent of cervical cancers are caused by one of three types of HPV, Jones said for the majority of people, the biggest problem caused by the virus is the stig-

ma attached to STDs — a fact she attributed to people's attitudes about sex.

"We're good at having sex, but terrible at talking about it," she said. "We don't have a very healthy view of our bodies; we don't have a very healthy view of sexuality."

For health officials, the biggest problem caused by HPV is tracking it. Because the virus cannot be detected through blood tests, the only way to know if a person is infected is the appearance of symptoms. And according to Dr. Henry Buck, coordinator of gynecology at the University of Kansas Health Center and an expert on HPV, the majority of people who have HPV never get warts. That makes the virus particularly hard to diagnose in men, who can't be tested through pap smears, which is the most common way the virus is discovered in women.

Buck said studies conducted during the 1990s at the University of California at Berkeley and at Rutgers University indicate around 50 percent of college students are infected with HPV. The Berkeley survey tested 467 women for the virus; 47 percent of them were positive. At Rutgers, 61 percent of the women tested were positive for the virus.

But Buck pointed out that infection is not necessarily the same thing as getting sick.

"It's kind of like how everyone has E. coli in their bowels," Buck said. "The presence doesn't mean a thing."

\*Name changed to protect the source's privacy.

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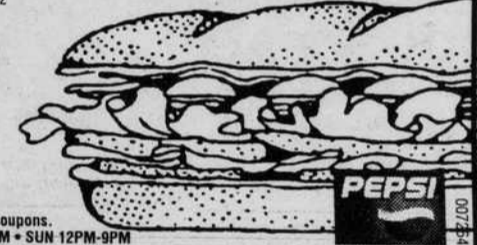
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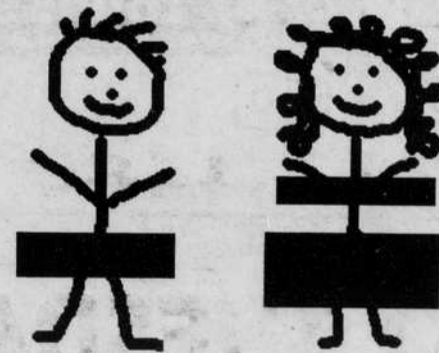
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