TRANSMISSION
HPV is usually passed by genital to genital and genital to anal contact (even without penetration). The virus can also be transmitted by oral to genital contact, although this probably occurs less often. Studies show that male condoms can reduce HPV transmission to females, although condoms only protect the skin they cover.

VACCINES
There are currently three HPV vaccines available. Experts recommend that all females between the ages of 9 and 26 get an HPV vaccine. About half of all new infections are diagnosed in girls and young women between 15 and 24 years of age, so early vaccination is important. Males are at risk for HPV and related diseases, too, so boys and young men are also recommended to be vaccinated.

TESTING
A Pap test doesn’t look for HPV, but can find cell changes to the cervix caused by the virus. Paps are the first line of defense against cervical cancer; most women who develop cervical cancer haven’t had a Pap in many years.

HPV tests find the virus and help healthcare providers know which women are at highest risk for cervical cancer. HPV tests are used routinely along with a Pap for women 30 and older (HPV in women under 30 is very common and tends to clear quickly.) One HPV test has recently been approved for use as primary cervical cancer screening for women age 25 and older, followed by a Pap test for women with certain results. HPV tests can also be used for younger women with unclear Pap test results. HPV tests are only used for cervical cancer screening, and aren’t approved for males.

THE EMOTIONAL SIDE
It can be upsetting when HPV is first diagnosed, but remember that having HPV is normal! It doesn’t mean that anyone did something wrong, just that like most others they were exposed to a common infection. There are 14 million new HPV infections in the U.S. each year alone!

FINDING SUPPORT
The American Sexual Health Association and the National Cervical Cancer Coalition have online support communities at Inspire.com that connect patients, partners, and caregivers. These are safe places where thousands of users find the information and support they need.