HPV and having children

Dear Alice,

If someone has genital warts, does that mean that s/he cannot or should not have children? If they take the risk, will the resulting child be born with HPV?

? Concerned for the future

Answer

Dear Concerned for the future,

If a woman has genital warts, which are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), the warts may appear on the outside of the vagina and/or on the inner walls of the vagina and on the cervix. Genital warts don't interfere with a woman's ability to get pregnant. However, during pregnancy, warts may get larger and/or may bleed, possibly due to increasing levels of estrogen. Warts along the vaginal wall might make the vagina less flexible and elastic during delivery. It may not be advisable to have the warts removed at this point because of the unknown possibility of birth defects caused by the substances used to remove them. Instead, Cesarean delivery might sometimes be recommended when there is a possibility of warts being present toward the end of a woman's pregnancy.

As for your question about a child being born with HPV, it is unlikely. There have been some cases where women with HPV in their vaginal canals during birth have passed the virus on to their babies in the form of laryngeal papilloma, which affects their throat, but this is quite rare. In cases where this occurs, surgery on the infant is sometimes necessary to remove airway blockages. But again, this is rare.

Most people who have HPV but do not have genital warts or any symptoms at all. There are over 100 types of HPV. Some types can cause warts and some can cause cancers, but most cause no symptoms at all. In fact, some studies indicate that three in four sexually active people have been infected with HPV at some point in their lives, but the infection is cleared by one's immune system. Only 1% will develop genital warts and only 1 in 1,000 women will develop cervical cancers. Other forms of cancers may develop from HPV, as well, including anal, vaginal, vulva, and penis. All are relatively rare.
Check out The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for more information on HPV. If there is concern about HPV and pregnancy, or for more information, make an appointment with a health care provider.

Alice!

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