

HUMAN PAPILLOMA VIRUS (HPV)

Melissa Beeson

How HPV Changed My Life



I was 32 years old, and a mother of two boys. I noticed abnormal bleeding with intercourse a month before my scheduled annual visit with my gynecologist. When I spoke with my doctor at my appointment my concerns with the bleeding were addressed, routine PAP screening was done, and results showed that everything was normal. The bleeding continued, and I requested further testing which resulted in a colposcopy biopsy that finally revealed the presence of cancer cells. This led to a cold knife cone biopsy, and ultimately my diagnosis... Stage 3b cervical cancer. My treatment consumed 285 days of my life. This treatment consisted of a radical hysterectomy, 3 chemotherapy drugs administered over 10 infusions, 34 external and 3 internal radiation treatments, and multiple complications. I now live with lymphedema and neuropathy from my surgery.

I had been to the gynecologist every year since I was 15. Seventeen years of clear PAP screenings with NO evidence of ever having abnormal cells left me with many questions on how this could be happening, and why the cancer was not seen on any of those years of regular screenings. The answer was that my cancer was caused by HPV and started to present at the back of my cervix closer to my uterus. By the time it presented during the colposcopy biopsy, the entire organ had been consumed by the cancer.

I now share my story in the hope that no one ever needs to endure what I have due to an HPV related cancer diagnosis. I advocate for the HPV vaccine, education for the public, regular health screenings that include PAP screening and HPV co-testing, awareness to the many cancers HPV can cause in both men and women, but most importantly being your own advocate when your body is telling you something is wrong. The vaccine builds protection against a virus that can take years to develop a cancer that can be missed during screening, just like it was missed in me.

Melissa is one of 79 million persons in the US infected with HPV. HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection, and transmission most commonly occurs in teens and young adults. Most people do not have symptoms or complications from HPV infection, and they are able to rid the virus on their own; however, persistent infection with high-risk HPV types can be dangerous. HPV causes most of the cases of cervical cancer in women and most of the anal, penile and oropharyngeal cancers in males. In addition, most cases of genital warts are caused by HPV.

There is no cure for HPV infection, although the infection usually goes away on its own. It is possible for the virus to remain in a "sleeping" or dormant state and be reactivated years later.

Fortunately, there is a safe and effective vaccine that protects against the most problematic types of HPV. It can be given at age 9 or 10, and is routinely recommended for males and females starting at ages 11 or 12. It is most effective if given before the onset of sexual activity, and can be given alongside the other adolescent vaccines. The vaccine is routinely suggested for males and females up to the age of 26, and it can be given up to the age of 45.

The HPV vaccine is a cancer-prevention vaccine. Please ask your doctor about the HPV vaccine and protect yourself and your children from HPV associated cancers.

For more information, please visit www.vaccinateindiana.org

