

Bears and Health

Ursus and Uranus: Anal Warts, Anal Cancer and a New Vaccine by Lawrence D. Mass, M.D.

Cancer of the colon in men has become like cancer of the breast in women—so common that everybody has at least one friend, relative or coworker who's had it. But cancer of the colon is pretty rare in men under 50, even in those with a family history of the disease. So when I learned that a bear buddy in his early 40's had it, my antennae went up. As they did a few months later when another friend, somewhat older, turned up with the same problem. Both of these men were gay, HIV negative and otherwise healthy and both were told they had "rectal cancer," which is an unusual presentation of cancer of the colon. As it turns out both men had "anal cancer," an otherwise rare cancer of a different breed that is becoming increasingly common in gay men.

Most gay men I know have at least some awareness of the frontrunners of diseases that we are at risk for—syphilis, gonorrhea, HIV, pediculosis (body lice—crabs, scabies), hepatitis a, b, and (to a lesser extent) c, herpes, warts. But only 2 of the maybe 30 (nonmedical) HIV-negative gay friends and acquaintances I've asked knew anything about anal cancer. Turns out that a number of these folks vaguely remembered reading the reports about anal cancer that were out there in the gay press a couple of years ago, but they assumed that this was primarily a problem of persons with AIDS.

In the general population, anal cancer is rare—about 1 case per 100,000 people. Among men who have sex with men, that number has jumped to 35 per 100,000. Although cases are twice as common in those who are HIV positive, cases in those who are HIV negative are far from negligible. The virus that causes anal cancer is the same family of virus that causes cancer of the cervix in women—Human Papilloma Virus (HPV).

The bad news first. Condom use won't necessarily prevent transmission of HPV. And you are not necessarily in the clear even if you have little or no history of getting fucked, since the virus is highly transmissible even from finger play, though it's just common sense that the more anal sex you've had the higher the risk. Since this is a cancer that develops slowly over the years, it's unlikely that a 27 year old, even someone with a heavy history of getting fucked bareback, is going to develop it, at least not until many years later. A middle-aged/older man, on the other hand, even if he stopped getting fucked 25 years ago, is at greater risk. Another factor upping that risk is a history of anal warts.

A reminder here about anal and genital warts. They're common. They're contagious (skin-to-skin contact). They can be symptomatic—they can itch, cause pain and bleed—or asymptomatic. They can be grossly visible and/or inside the anus, hidden from view. They're treatable. They can recur.

But now for the good news, which greatly outweighs the bad. The screening for anal cancer is simple, painless and inexpensive. The test is called an anal pap smear. Yes, it's virtually the same test as the cervical pap smear that all women get routinely to screen for cancer of the cervix, a common cancer in sexually active women that is incidentally also caused by HPV. And yes, that's the implication: that all men with *any* history of being sexually active anally with other men should get a screening anal pap smear. Women and bisexual or even heterosexual men who have anal sex—and there are *plenty* who do!-- should likewise be screened.

More good news. In the event of dysplasia—the term to describe abnormal pap smear cells—effective, minimally invasive treatments are available, just as with cancer of the cervix. For more advanced dysplasia/cancer, a situation likely to be prevented by early/regular screening—surgery and/or chemo and radiation may be necessary.

And the best news of all. As early as next year, there will be a new, apparently very effective preventive vaccine for HPV. But because this is a preventive vaccine, this really good news is primarily for future generations of young gay men—especially gay teens-- who haven't yet been exposed to HPV, which is otherwise very common among us.

Some advice: Most mainstream docs will not be familiar with anal cancer and will not offer anal pap smear screening. Find a gay or other doctor who is and does. The same will apply to the HPV vaccine—it's not likely to be offered to gay men outside gay doctor/gay clinic settings. Hopefully, insurance coverage for the vaccine will include men who are at risk as well as women. Also, you need to know that colonoscopies do not screen for anal cancer. So if your colonoscopy was normal, don't assume that you don't still need an anal pap smear.

And what if your doctor doesn't know you're gay? Well, as they say, you can't always save face if you want to save your ass.

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