

Understanding the Pap Test

What is a Pap test?

A Pap test, also called a Pap smear, is a screening test. The test helps your doctor find changes in the cells covering your cervix (the opening to the womb at the top of the vagina) that may lead to cancer. The test does not check for infections or sexually transmitted disease. A Pap test is usually performed during your regular pelvic exam.

Why is it important?

The Pap test is a very effective way of finding problems that could eventually lead to cancer of the cervix. Cervical cancer can be very serious — nearly 5,000 women die from it each year. However, if changes in the cells of the cervix are found during “pre-cancerous” stages, the chances of cure are excellent. Since the Pap test was invented 50 years ago, the number of deaths from cervical cancer has dropped more than 70%.

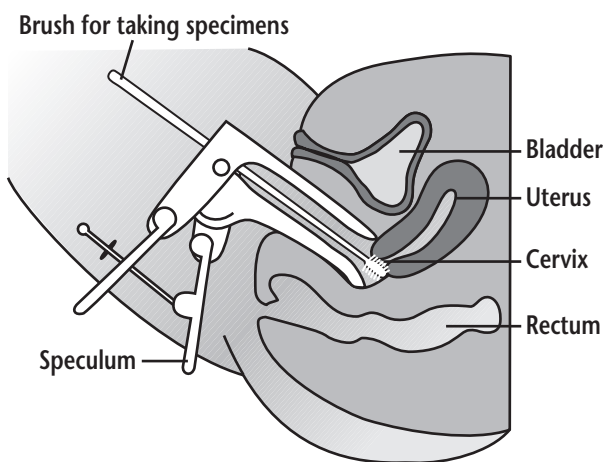
Who should get a Pap test?

Women who are sexually active or who are age 18 or older should have regular pelvic exams and Pap tests. The upper age limit is unclear; discuss this with your clinician.

How often should I get a Pap test?

Many women get a Pap test every year. Some women who are at lower risk and who have had several normal Pap tests in a row have the test performed less often. Your age is also a factor. Your clinician can help you determine how often you should have a Pap test. A woman who has had a hysterectomy (had her uterus removed) usually does not need a Pap test.

How a Pap Test Is Done



How is a Pap test done?

The Pap test is very simple and quick. During your pelvic exam, your clinician will insert a device, called a speculum, into your vagina to open it and make it easier to see your cervix. A brush and a wooden scraper (similar to a tongue depressor) are used to collect a sample of cells from the cervix.

Will it hurt?

Usually not. You might feel the scraper or brush being wiped across your cervix, which sometimes causes a slight twinge. Many women say that the uncomfortable part of the exam is due to the opening of the speculum. You can make the exam less uncomfortable by breathing deeply and trying to relax the muscles at the opening of your vagina.

What happens to the cells that are collected?

The cells usually are placed on a glass slide. The sample then goes to a laboratory for examination. Doctors or specially trained technicians at the laboratory look at the sample under a microscope or by computer to see if the cells look normal.

How are the results reported?

The laboratory will contact your doctor with the results of your Pap test. Most tests come back “negative,” which means the cells are normal. Abnormal results are reported according to a system that describes the level of change seen in the cells. This can range from very minor to very serious. Your clinician will notify you if your Pap test results are abnormal.

If my Pap test is abnormal, does it mean I have cancer?

Usually not. Don't be alarmed if your Pap test comes back as abnormal. Many things can cause the cells of your cervix to appear abnormal and many of these conditions disappear without treatment. The Pap test is not always accurate, and often abnormal Pap tests are “false alarms.” Nevertheless, you should follow up abnormal tests with your clinician.

The most common cause of cervical cell changes is a virus called human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is usually transmitted sexually and can also cause warts on the genitals. Some forms of HPV can lead to cervical cancer, so it is important to discuss treatments and prevention with your doctor.

How can I protect myself against HPV and cervical cancer?

Your risk of developing cervical cancer or getting HPV is related to several factors, the most important of which is sexual behavior. You are more at risk for HPV if you have multiple sexual partners or if your partner has more than one sexual partner. You can reduce your risk by practicing abstinence (not having sex) or by having only one lifetime sexual partner. Male latex condoms offer the most effective protection from HPV.



For More Information

To learn more about the Pap test or cervical cancer and treatments, contact the following groups:

American Cancer Society

1599 Clifton Road, NE
Atlanta, GA 30329
Telephone: 1-800-ACS-2345
Web site: <http://www.cancer.org>

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

409 12th Street, SW, PO Box 96920
Washington, DC 20090-6920
Telephone: 1-800-762-2264
Web site: <http://www.acog.org>
Free publication: *Special Procedures:
The Pap Test*

National Cancer Institute

Office of Cancer Communications
31 Center Drive, MSC 2580
Bethesda, MD 20892-2580
Telephone: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)
Web site: <http://rex.nci.nih.gov>
Free publication: *What You Need to Know about
Cancer of the Cervix*

National Cervical Cancer Coalition

16501 Sherman Way, Suite 110
Van Nuys, CA 91406
Telephone: 1-818-909-3849
Web site: <http://www.nccc-online.org>