

Things to remember:

- ✓ **A Pap test is a simple test** that checks for cell changes in the cervix that could become cancer.
- ✓ **Although you may feel healthy, abnormal changes can appear without any symptoms.** That is why it is important to get Pap tests regularly.
- ✓ **You should get a Pap test every 1 to 3 years.** Depending on your results, your doctor or nurse may suggest getting tested more often.
- ✓ **Abnormal Pap test results do not mean that you have cancer.** It may only mean that your doctor or nurse needs to do more tests.

National Cancer Institute

Pap Tests

Things to Know



NIH Publication No. 07-6278
Printed September 2007



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
National Institutes of Health

A simple test can help prevent cervical cancer. It is called the Pap test (or Pap smear). The Pap test looks for abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix.

Where is the cervix?

The cervix is the narrow, lowest part of the uterus. It forms an opening between the uterus (where the baby grows when a woman is pregnant) and the vagina.

What causes cervical cancer?

Almost all cervical cancer is caused by an infection from a virus called HPV or human papillomavirus (pronounced pap-ih-LO-ma-VYE-rus).

HPV infection is very common and is spread through sexual contact. Most people don't know they have HPV because they have no symptoms.

Most HPV infections go away on their own, but some may not. If HPV does not go away, it can cause cell changes. The Pap test can find these changes before they become cervical cancer.

If cell changes are found early and treated, cervical cancer can be prevented.

Prevent cervical cancer—have Pap tests regularly.

What is a Pap Test?

The Pap test is a simple and routine way to find cell changes. During a Pap test the doctor or nurse will collect a few cells from your cervix to send to a medical lab for testing. You can get the Pap test at your doctor's office, clinic, or community health center.

Why should I have a Pap test?

Sometimes cells in a woman's cervix begin to change and look abnormal. These abnormal cells may not be cancer yet. But if you don't have the cell changes treated, the changes may become cancer. Having Pap tests regularly gives you the best chance of finding cell changes or cervical cancer early, when they are easy to treat.

The Pap test checks for cell changes caused by HPV that could become cancer. The Pap test does not detect many sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Talk with your doctor or nurse about whether you should be tested for STDs.

When should I have a Pap test?

- Have your first Pap test about 3 years after the first time you have sex, or when you reach age 21 (whichever comes first).
- Keep getting Pap tests every 1 to 3 years. If you are 30 or older, an HPV test may be done along with the Pap test.
- Talk with your doctor or nurse about whether and when you should get a Pap test if you are 65 or older.

Talk with your doctor or nurse about how often you should have a Pap test.

What should I expect with a Pap test?

BEFORE the Pap test

For two days before your Pap test, do not douche or use any vaginal medicines, spermicidal foams, creams, or jellies unless directed by your doctor. If you have heavy bleeding from your period the day of the test, call your doctor or nurse to change the appointment to another day.

DURING the Pap test

A female staff member will be with you during the test. Your hips and legs will be covered. Your doctor or nurse will use an instrument called a “speculum” to open the vagina and see your cervix. Your doctor or nurse will then collect some cells from the cervix using a swab or a small brush. You may feel some discomfort.

AFTER the Pap test

Your doctor or nurse will send the cells to a medical lab. The results will come back to your doctor or nurse in 1 or 2 weeks.

- If the test results are **normal** (or “negative”), your doctor’s office may not notify you at all. If you do not hear from your doctor’s office, you should call to be sure that the results are normal.
- If there is something **abnormal** on the test (or “positive”), your doctor should tell you. It is very important that you see your doctor for follow-up as soon as possible. Most times, an abnormal (or “positive”) test does not mean that you have cancer. It only means that your doctor needs to do more tests.

Be sure to follow up with your doctor or nurse on all test results.

When talking with your doctor or nurse, be sure to:

- Mention your results of previous Pap tests, especially if they were abnormal.
- Ask questions if there is something that is not clear to you.



Most abnormal cell changes do not cause any symptoms in the beginning. That is why it is important to get a Pap test and to follow up with your doctor or nurse. Depending on the results of your Pap test, your doctor or nurse may do an HPV test.

A note about HPV

HPV is a virus that is spread through sexual contact. Condoms do not fully protect against HPV. You can be infected with HPV and not know it because there are no symptoms. Most HPV infections go away on their own, but some may not. The infections that do not go away can lead to abnormal cell changes in the cervix. Having Pap tests regularly can find these changes early and prevent cervical cancer. For more information about HPV, read *Understanding Cervical Changes* (see page 5 on how to order).

Did you know that an HPV vaccine is available to girls and young women? This vaccine has been shown to protect against some of the HPV types that cause cervical cancer. Ask your doctor about the HPV vaccine. Even if you get the vaccine, you will still need to have Pap tests regularly.

When can I stop getting a Pap test?

- If you are 65 or older, talk to your doctor or nurse about whether or not you should keep having Pap tests. Your doctor or nurse will tell you how often you should get one. This will depend on the results of your previous tests, and whether you are sexually active.
- A total hysterectomy (pronounced hiss-ter-EK-toe-mee) is when both the uterus and cervix have been taken out. If you had a hysterectomy to treat pre-cancer or cancer, you should continue to have Pap tests. If you had a total hysterectomy **that was not done to treat pre-cancer or cancer**, you do not need a Pap test. Talk with your doctor or nurse if you are not certain.

What if I can't afford a Pap test?

- **Free and low-cost tests:** If you have a low income or do not have health insurance, there may be places in your community where you can get a Pap test for free. For more information on where to get a free or low-cost Pap test, call toll-free 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). It is possible to speak to someone in English or Spanish.
- **Medicaid:** If you are eligible for Medicaid, you might not have to pay for the doctor visit and the Pap test. For more information, call your state Medicaid office.
- **Medicare:** If you are 65 years of age or older, Medicare pays for the Pap test every 2 years, or every year for certain women at higher risk. For more information, call toll-free 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227). It is possible to speak to someone in English or Spanish.

For more information

National Cancer Institute (NCI)

Cancer Information Service

Offers information on cancer prevention and screening. Responds to questions about cancer and to requests for free publications.

Toll-free: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)
in English or Spanish

TTY: 1-800-332-8615

Web Site: www.cancer.gov

En Español: www.cancer.gov/espanol

Chat online: www.cancer.gov/help

Free booklets that are available in print and online at www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/screening/cervical include:

- **Understanding Cervical Changes**
Provides information on abnormal Pap test results, follow-up tests, and treatment options.
- **Cervical Cancer: What You Can Do to Protect Yourself**
Provides information on Pap tests in Spanish and English.
- **Cervical Cancer: What Vietnamese Women Should Know**
Provides information on Pap tests in Vietnamese and English.
- **What You Need To Know About Cancer of the Cervix**
Provides information on symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment of cervical cancer.

Pap Test Reminder

Talk with your doctor or nurse about how often you should have a Pap test.

My next Pap test should be on: _____