The Annual Gynecological Exam at Eastern

Routine gynecological care is essential for all women. The annual exam consists of a breast exam, pelvic exam, Pap smear, and sometimes a rectovaginal exam. Every woman should have an annual Pap smear as part of a complete pelvic examination starting at age 21, and continuing thereafter as determined by her healthcare provider.

Why do I need an exam?

• To make sure your reproductive organs are normal and to check for other pelvic problems.
• To screen for infection.
• To screen for cervical cancer.
• If birth control is a concern, you and your healthcare provider will decide which methods of birth control are best for you.

Does it hurt?

The pelvic exam itself usually lasts only two to five minutes. You may feel some pressure, but not usually not pain. You will feel more comfortable during the exam if you can breathe slowly and keep your vaginal muscles relaxed. To prevent added discomfort, be sure to empty your bladder before your exam. Also, remember:

• Don’t schedule your exam during your period or for a few days after. If you do, the Pap smear may not show the cells clearly, and might be read as “abnormal.” In this case, you will need to return for another Pap test.

• Don’t use any vaginal creams, foams, gels, douches, or tampons for 48 hours before your exam. These products could cause an abnormal result. (University Health Services does not recommend the use of feminine deodorant products, or douching.)

• Don’t have vaginal sex for 48 hours before your exam. Sex can irritate the cervix or cause discharge (fluids) that can lead to an abnormal result.
What Happens During the Exam?

Prior to the exam you will be asked to complete a history form so the practitioner will have all the information she needs regarding your health.

You will be asked to undress from the waist down; you may keep your socks on for warmth. If your healthcare provider plans to do a clinical breast exam, you will be asked to remove the rest of your clothing as well. You will be given an examination gown to wear.

You'll be asked to lie down on your back on the exam table. Sliding your buttocks down to the end of the table, you will rest your feet on holders, called stirrups, which are located at the same height as the exam table.

First, your health care provider will examine your external genital area to evaluate you for signs of disease or abnormalities.

Then your healthcare provider will examine the inside of the vagina using a speculum. The speculum is a slender instrument shaped like a duck bill, which slides inside the vagina much like a tampon. Aside from a little pressure, the speculum should not cause pain. With the speculum in place, your provider can see your cervix (the opening of your uterus or womb).

Using a small plastic spatula or a brush, your healthcare provider will gently collect some cells from your cervix for a Pap test (see picture at left). These cells are placed in a special specimen vial and sent to a laboratory for analysis. The Pap test looks for precancerous or cancerous changes in your cervix. You will be contacted if your Pap smear shows any abnormal cells.

If you have been or are sexually active, chlamydia and gonorrhea testing will routinely be done by swabbing the cervix with cotton swabs before the speculum is removed. We also strongly recommend HIV testing as part of your annual exam. It’s free, painless and results are available in 20 minutes.

If symptoms of any other vaginal infection are present, your healthcare provider will take a sample of your vaginal secretions with a cotton swab for examination under a microscope.
After the speculum is removed, your healthcare provider will put lubricating gel on her gloved fingers and gently insert one or two of them into your vagina while pressing on your abdomen with the other hand. This procedure, called a bimanual exam (see illustration to the left), allows your provider to examine your uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries. She will check for their proper size and placement, indications of abnormal growths, the presence of pain, or other signs which might indicate a need for further testing.

Remember...

Starting at age 21, you should have a PAP test every other year. If the Pap test is abnormal, you may need to have one more frequently. You should be checked for sexually transmitted infections EVERY YEAR once you become sexually active—no matter what age that is. And, of course, you should have a gynecological exam anytime you are having symptoms that something is wrong. Be proud of your body and take care of it!