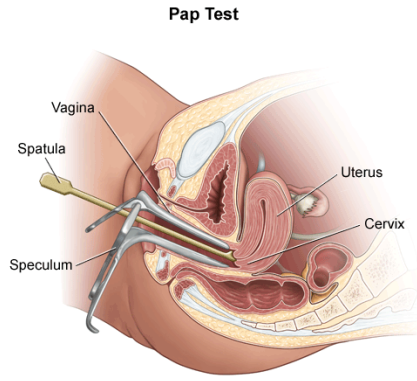


Pap Tests

Frequently Asked Questions



What is a Pap Test?

A Pap test (previously called a Pap smear) is a test your health care provider (HCP) does to check for signs of cancer of the cervix. The cervix is part of your uterus (womb). During a Pap test, your HCP will put a special instrument called a speculum into your vagina. This helps open your vagina so your cervix can be more easily seen and a sample of cells from your cervix can be obtained. Next, your HCP will gently clean your cervix with a cotton swab and then collect a sample of cells using a small brush, a tiny spatula or a cotton swab. These cells will then be placed in a solution and sent to the lab to be checked under a microscope.

Pap tests usually are not associated with any pain or discomfort.

What is the sample of cells checked for?

The cells from your cervix are checked for signs that they're changing from normal cells to abnormal cells. Before they turn into cancer, cells go through a series of changes. The results of your Pap test can show whether your cells are going through these changes long before you actually have cancer. **If caught and treated early, cervical cancer is not life threatening. This is why it is so important that you get regular Pap tests.**

What do the results mean?

A normal Pap test means that all the cells in your cervix are normal and healthy. An abnormal Pap test can be a sign of a number of changes in the cells on your cervix, including:

- Inflammation (irritation). This can be caused by an infection of the cervix, including yeast infection, infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV) the herpes virus or many other infections
- Abnormal cells. These changes are called cervical dysplasia. The cells are not cancer cells, but may be precancerous (which means they could eventually turn into cancer)
- More serious signs of cancer. These changes affect the top layers of the cervix but don't go beyond the cervix
- More advanced cancer

Note: The vast majority of abnormal pap tests ARE NOT cancer.

How often should I have a Pap test?

You should have your first Pap test when you turn 21 whether you have been sexually active or not. Certain things put you at higher risk of cervical cancer. Your HCP will consider these when recommending how often you should have a Pap test. As long as your Pap test result is normal, continue having this test every 3 years until age 30.

After 30, speak with your HCP about how frequently you should have Pap tests done. Keep having them throughout your life, even after you've gone through menopause. If your Pap results are abnormal at any point in your life, you may need to have them done more frequently. Your HCP will advise you about that.

At age 65 years, talk with your HCP about how often you need a Pap test. If you've been having them regularly and they've been normal, you may not need to continue having them.

How reliable is the test?

No test is perfect, but **the Pap test is a very reliable test. It has helped drastically lower the number of women who die of cervical cancer.** Sometimes the test may need to be redone because not enough cells were obtained. The lab will tell your HCP if this happens.

What should I do before the test?

Plan to have your test done at a time when you aren't having your menstrual period. Don't douche, use a feminine deodorant or have sex for 24 hours before the test.

What happens if my Pap test result is abnormal?

If the results of your Pap test are abnormal, your HCP may want to repeat the test or may want you to have a colposcopy. A colposcopy gives your HCP a way to get a closer look at your cervix and to take a sample of tissue (called a biopsy). An instrument called a colposcope is used to shine a light on your cervix and magnify it. Once the test is over, your HCP will explain the results and discuss treatment options with you.

What puts me at risk for cervical cancer?

Risk factors for cervical cancer include:

- Starting to have sex early (before age 18)
- Having had many sexual partners
- Being infected with a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or having had a sexual partner with an STI
- Smoking

The main risk factors for cervical cancer are related to sexual practices. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), specifically Human Papilloma Virus, or HPV, may make the cells of your cervix more likely to undergo changes that can lead to cancer. HPV is thought to cause up to 70-80% of all cervical cancers. It is also thought to be the cause of a significant number of cases of mouth and throat cancer as well as cancer of the anus/rectum and penis.

Is there anything I can do to avoid getting cervical cancer?

You may be able to reduce your risk of cervical cancer if you:

- **Make sure to get a pap test done as recommended throughout your life!**
- Delay sexual activity until after the age of 18, or later
- Limit your number of sex partners. Opt for a committed relationship rather than casual ones
- Always use condoms to protect against STIs although condoms aren't 100% protective
- Don't smoke – cigarettes are linked to cervical cancer, and many other cancers
- **Get the HPV vaccine—Gardasil or Cervarix. Very effective at reducing your risk of becoming infected**
- Make sure both you and your partner are tested for sexually transmitted infections although there is no test for HPV except as part of a PAP test for women

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