

Pap Tests

Your Best Defense Against Cervical Cancer

Deborah Ronco MD, St. Vincent Hospital and Health Services

What is a Pap test?

A Pap test or Pap smear, is a test done by a doctor or other health professional to look for early signs of cervical cancer. It is part of the annual physical examination for women. During a Pap test, a small sample of cells from the outside and inside of the cervix are collected. To begin the exam, a speculum will be used to gently open the walls of your vagina, allowing the doctor to see your cervix directly. Then, a small wooden spatula or a thin brush is rubbed over your cervix to gather cells. These are sent to a laboratory where they are examined under a microscope.

Why are Pap tests important?

A Pap test is a screening test for cervical cancer. In women worldwide, cervical cancer is the second most common kind of cancer. Since the Pap test was invented by a doctor named George Papanicolaou, doctors have been able to detect cervical cancer in its very earliest stages. In the United States, the death rate from cervical cancer has dropped dramatically. Cervical Cancer is almost 100% curable if it is caught early.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus that is spread through sexual contact. HPV is the cause of the majority of cervical cancers. Infection with this virus can cause changes to your cervix even if you don't have any symptoms from the virus. In women who have abnormal pap smears, testing can now be done to determine if HPV infection is present.

When should Pap tests be done?

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) recommends that women who are sexually active or who have reached 18 years of age should have:

A Pap test and pelvic exam every year.

You and your doctor may consider doing the Pap test less frequently if you have three or more normal Pap tests in a row, if you have had a hysterectomy, or if you are older than 65. Remember that even if your Pap test is being done less frequently, you should still have a pelvic exam every year so that your doctor can examine your ovaries and uterus.

What if my Pap test is abnormal?

Pap tests can be abnormal for a number of different reasons.

- Inflammation (irritation) – This can be secondary to yeast, herpes, HPV or other infections. It can also be caused by douching or vaginal medications.
- Very early signs of cancer – These are changes in the cells that cause a “pre-cancerous” condition, also known as “dysplasia”.
- More serious signs of cancer – This requires intervention by your doctor to determine whether cancer is present and whether it has spread beyond your cervix.

The following things can increase your chance of having an abnormal Pap test:

- Being infected with a sexually transmitted disease (STD)
- Multiple sexual partners
- Early age of first intercourse
- Smoking cigarettes
- Using birth control pills for more than 5 years
- Impairment of your immune system or infection with HIV

If you have an abnormal Pap test, your doctor will either repeat the test or your doctor will recommend colposcopy. Colposcopy is an examination of your cervix with a colposcope, which is similar to a microscope. Your doctor will use the colposcope to examine your cervix very carefully. Areas that appear abnormal may be biopsied during the examination.

Where else can I find information about Pap tests?

- Your family doctor or ob/gyn
- www.familydoctor.org/healthfacts/138/ - an educational website by the American Academy of Family Physicians.
- Webmd.com – a website with information about numerous health topics.
- www.acog.org – an educational website by the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

References:

Copeland, Larry J. Textbook of Gynecology. 2nd Edition. W.B Saunders Co, 2000. Pp1225-1260. "Advances in the Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment of Cervical Disease". APGO Educational Series. 2002

"2003 Compendium of Selected Publications". American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists pp 119-120, 689-692.