

CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING

THE PAP TEST AN IMPORTANT LIFE SAVER

What is a Pap test?

The Pap test (sometimes called a Pap smear) is a way to look at cells taken from the cervix. The cervix is a part of a woman's reproductive organs (the lower part of the uterus).

A Pap test is a simple test, it takes only a few minutes but may save your life.

Do I need to have a Pap test?

You should have regular Pap tests unless:

- You have never had sexual intercourse, **or**
- You have had a complete hysterectomy for a non-cancer reason.

If you are unsure about your need for a Pap test, talk with your health care provider.

Why is a Pap test important?

The Pap test detects changes in the cells of the cervix that might develop into cancer. (The first changes can usually be seen years before you get cancer).

The abnormal cells can easily be cured if found and treated early.

Most cancers of the cervix can be prevented with regular testing.

Where can I go to have a Pap test?

A Pap test is done in your doctor's office or at a medical clinic.

- When you make your appointment, tell the office staff it is for a Pap test.
- You should plan your Pap test for when you are not having your period.
- You should let your doctor/nurse know if you have ever been told that your test result was abnormal.

You should avoid intercourse or douching for 24 hours before the test.

Can I have a Pap test while pregnant?

It is perfectly safe to have a Pap test during pregnancy.

Some spotting may occur after the Pap test but this is not harmful to the pregnancy.

How is a Pap test done?

While you lie on the examination table your doctor/nurse will insert a speculum into your vagina to look at your cervix (a speculum is a slender metal or plastic tool that looks like a ducks bill).

The doctor/nurse will leave the speculum in place and brush and scrape the cervix to collect cells.

These cells are put on a microscope slide and sent to a lab for interpretation.

Some women say that the Pap test can be uncomfortable but is it quick.

How will I get the results of my Pap test?

Ask your doctor/nurse when you will get the results of your Pap test

Most Pap test results are normal. Sometimes your doctor/nurse may want to repeat the test.

Discuss with your doctor/nurse when to have your net Pap test.

So my Pap test result is normal

Like any medical test, the Pap test is not perfect. Therefore, regular repeat testing is important to make sure any abnormalities are not missed.

- You might be wondering why, if the test doesn't detect cancer when it is there, you should get the test done again. We know that repeating Pap tests improves the chances that all important abnormalities will be found.
- The process of cell change takes several years, so there is time to do repeat tests.

Symptoms like persistent bleeding or bleeding after intercourse may indicate a problem. Be sure to let your doctor/nurse know if you have these symptoms even if your last Pap test was normal.

It is important to remember that the Pap test is not a test for sexually transmitted diseases, or cancer of the uterus or ovaries. Discuss testing for these with your doctor.

What if my Pap test result is abnormal?

Abnormal Pap test results do not necessarily mean that you have cancer so try not to worry.

Infection or inflammation in your cervix or vagina can also cause abnormal looking cells. If the cells look abnormal, several different treatments may be recommended.

1. Repeat testing in 3 to 6 months.
2. Referral for a colposcopy – a test to look more closely at the cervical cells.
3. Referral to a gynecologist for treatment.

What are some of the common words that I will hear when I talk to my healthcare provider about my Pap test?

Some of the common ways of describing abnormal results are listed in the table below.

HPV	Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is a very common virus transmitted by sexual contact. HPV does not usually cause symptoms but it does seem to add to the development of abnormal cells. BE SURE TO HAVE REGULAR PAP TESTS TO MONITOR THESE CELL CHANGES.
ASCUS	Atypical squamous cells or undetermined significance (ASCUS). This diagnosis is common and means that some of the cells do not look normal but they may not look precancerous either. Your doctor may recommend another Pap test.
Dysplasia	Dysplasia is a term used to describe abnormal cells. Dysplasia is not cancer although it may develop into very early cancer of the cervix.

SIL	Squamous intraepithelial lesions (SIL) are abnormal changes in the cells on the surface of the cervix. These cells are abnormal changes in the cells on the surface of the cervix. These cells are abnormal and the term intraepithelial means that they are on the surface of the cervix. Further testing may be needed. Discuss with your doctor.
CIN	Cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) means a new, abnormal growth of cells, similar to SIL. Further testing may be needed.
Carcinoma is situ	Carcinoma in situ is a pre-invasive cancer that only affects the surface cells and has not spread into deeper tissues. Your doctor will refer you for treatment.
Cervical cancer or invasive cervical cancer	Cervical cancer or invasive cervical cancer is when abnormal cells spread deeper into the cervix or to other tissues or organs. This cannot be determined with a Pap smear alone. Your doctor will refer you for treatment.

This information guide was prepared by the Cervical Cancer Working Group of the Alberta Clinical Practice Guideline Program to assist you with decisions about cervical cancer screening. If you have any questions, please consult your doctor. The Cervical Cancer Screening Working Group is a multidisciplinary team with representation from family practice, the Alberta Cancer Board, epidemiology, gynecology, cytopathology, laboratories, public health, and public.