



University of Colorado Hospital

ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

Frequently Asked Questions About Cervical Cancer Screening (Pap Tests)

Health recommendations are updated periodically as newer, more robust evidence becomes available. Changes are expected to occur over time to provide greater benefits than harms. New guidelines for Pap tests were issued on November 20, 2009 by the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG).

At what age should women start screening for cervical cancer by Pap test?

Per latest guidelines released by the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG), screening for cervical cancer by Pap test should start at age 21 and not sooner.

Why don't the new guidelines recommend Pap tests before age 21?

Cervical cancer is rare before age of 21 but cytological abnormalities are common. As it takes a decade for pre-cancer lesions to become invasive, most of these abnormalities regress spontaneously.

At what age can women stop getting Pap tests?

It is reasonable to stop screening in women between age 65 and 70 years of age who have had three or more consecutive normal tests and no abnormal results within the preceding 10 years.

How often do I need to have Pap test?

Women with an average level of risk should get Pap tests every 2 years between age 21 to 29 and every 3 years thereafter if they have had three consecutive normal tests.

What are the risk factors for cervical cancer?

The primary risk factors are as follows:

- Infection with high-risk Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) such as HPV 16, HPV 18, HPV 31, HPV 33, and HPV 45, as well as some others which are tested by your women's health provider when appropriate
- Multiple or new sexual partners
- Smoking
- Immunosuppressive illnesses such as AIDS
- DES exposure in uterus
 - DES is a hormonal drug that was given to some women to prevent miscarriage between 1940 and 1971. Women whose mothers took DES (when pregnant with them) develop clear-cell adenocarcinoma of the vagina or cervix more often than would normally be expected
- Family history of cervical cancer
 - Cervical cancer may run in some families. If your mother or sister had cervical cancer, your chances of developing the disease are 2 to 3 times higher. This familial tendency maybe caused by an inherited condition that makes some women less able to fight off HPV infection than others.

I've had a hysterectomy. Do I still need to get Pap tests?

Continued Pap testing is recommended only for women who have a history of cancer or pre-cancer cells such as moderate to severe dysplasia (CIN 2 or 3) or risk factors such as DES exposure as a fetus.

I have had HPV vaccine (Gardasil) series. Do I still need to get Pap tests regularly?

The effect of HPV vaccination on cervical cancer screening is uncertain and at this time it is recommended to screen the same way as non-immunized women.

If I don't need yearly Pap tests, do I still need to have annual pelvic exams?

Yes. Annual gynecological examination still is appropriate to evaluate other parts of genital tract, even if you don't need to have screening for cervical cancer.

What is the HPV testing?

A Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) test is done to find a high-risk HPV infection such as HPV 16, HPV 18, HPV 31, HPV 33, and HPV 45, as well as some others in women.

HPV is a sexually transmitted infection. The HPV test checks for the genetic material (DNA) of the Human Papilloma Virus. Like a Pap test, an HPV test is done on a sample of cells collected from the cervix.

An HPV test is done:

- To check for high-risk types of Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) in women who had a Pap test that showed abnormal cervical cells called atypical squamous cells (ASC). An HPV test can help look for one or more high-risk types of HPV. If an HPV test shows that high-risk types of HPV are present, further testing, such as a colposcopy or cervical biopsy, may be recommended.
- To check for HPV in women older than age 30 as part of screening for abnormal cervical cells.

- To help check for abnormal cervical cells after treatment of a high-risk HPV infection.

The HPV test may be done at the same time as the Pap test. The results of this test can help doctors decide if further tests or treatments are needed.

What if my Pap test comes back abnormal? What do I need to do?

You need to follow up with your women's health provider. Further testing may be necessary. This testing will be determined based on the severity of the abnormality and your risk factors.