

PAP TEST

midlife and beyond...



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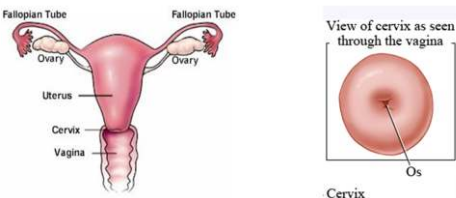
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The Papanicolaou test (abbreviated as Pap test, known earlier as Pap smear, cervical smear, or smear test) is a method of cervical screening used to detect potentially pre-cancerous and cancerous processes in the cervix (opening of the uterus or womb). Cervical cancer occurs when abnormal cells on the cervix grow out of control. Cervical cancer can often be successfully treated when it's found early. It is usually found at a very early stage through a Pap test. The Pap test checks for cervical cancer in which cells scraped from the opening of the cervix are examined under a microscope. This test is sometimes called a Pap smear.



How the test is performed

The woman has to lie on a table and has to place her feet in stirrups. The doctor gently places an instrument called a speculum into her vagina to open it slightly. This allows the doctor to see inside the vagina and cervix. Cells are gently scraped from the cervix area. The sample of cells is sent to a lab for examination.



How to prepare for the test

The woman has to give complete history regarding all the medicines that are taken. Some birth control pills that contain estrogen or progestin may affect test results.

She should also tell her doctor if

- She had an abnormal pap test.
- She is pregnant.

She should not do the following for 24 hours before the test:

- Douche (douching should never be done)
- Have intercourse
- Use tampons
- Vaginal medications
- Vaginal contraceptives such as birth control foams, creams, or jellies

One avoid scheduling Pap test while she is in period (is menstruating). Blood may make the Pap test results less accurate. If she is having unexpected bleeding, do not cancel her examination. Her doctor will determine if the Pap test can still be done.

It is necessary empty bladder just before the test.

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Why the Test is performed

The Pap test is a screening test for cervical cancer. Most cervical cancers can be detected early if a woman has routine Pap tests done.

Screening should start at age 21.

After the first test:

- One should have a Pap test every 3 years to check for cervical cancer.
- If she is over age 30 and her HPV testing done, and both the Pap test and HPV test are normal, she can be tested every 5 years (HPV is the human papillomavirus, the virus that causes genital warts and cervical cancer).
- Most women can stop having Pap tests after age 65 to 70 as long as they have had 3 negative tests within the past 10 years.
- A woman may not need to have a Pap test if she has had a total hysterectomy (uterus and cervix removed) and had not have an abnormal Pap test, cervical cancer, or other pelvic cancer.

Normal Results

A normal result means there are no abnormal cells present. The Pap test is not 100% accurate. Cervical cancer may be missed in a small number of cases. Most of the time, cervical cancer develops very slowly, and follow-up Pap Tests should find any changes in time for treatment.

What Abnormal Results Mean

When a Pap test shows abnormal changes, further testing or follow-up is needed. The next step depends on the results of the Pap test, her previous history of Pap tests and risk factors she may have for cervical cancer.

For minor cell changes, doctors will recommend another Pap test in 6 to 12 months.

Follow-up testing or treatment may include:

- Colposcopy-directed biopsy
- An HPV test to check for the presence of the HPV virus types most likely to cause cancer
- Cervix cryosurgery
- Cone biopsy

The Pap test is the best way to find cervical cell changes that can lead to cervical cancer. Regular Pap tests almost always show these cell changes before they turn into cancer. It's important to follow up with a doctor after any abnormal Pap test result, so the doctor can treat abnormal cell changes. This may help prevent cervical cancer.

If she is age 26 or younger, she can get the HPV vaccine, which protects against types of HPV that cause most cases of cervical cancer.

The virus that causes cervical cancer is spread through sexual contact. The best way to avoid getting a sexually transmitted infection is to not have sex. If you do have sex, practice safer sex, such as using condoms and limiting the number of sex partners you have.

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