

Pap Tests

The Pap test (or Pap smear) looks for cancers and precancers in the cervix (the lower part of the uterus that opens into the vagina). Precancers are cell changes that might become cancer if they are not treated the right way. Most health insurance plans must cover Pap tests or cervical cancer screening at no cost to you.

Q: What is a Pap test?

A: A Pap test checks the cervix for abnormal cell changes. Cell changes can develop on the cervix and, if not found and treated, can lead to cervical cancer. Cervical cancer can almost always be prevented, and having regular Pap tests is the key.

Q: Do all women need Pap tests?

A: Most women ages 21 to 65 should get Pap tests as part of routine health care. Women who do not have a cervix (usually because of a hysterectomy), and who also do not have a history of cervical cancer or abnormal Pap results, do not need Pap tests. Women ages 65 and older who have had three normal Pap tests in a row and no abnormal test results in the last 10 years do not need Pap tests.

Q: How often do I need to get a Pap test?

A: Talk with your doctor about what is best for you. Most women can follow these guidelines:

- If you are between ages 21 and 29, you should get a Pap test every 3 years.
- If you are between ages 30 and 64, you should get a Pap test and human papillomavirus (HPV) test together every 5 years or a Pap test alone every 3 years.

- If you are 65 or older, ask your doctor if you can stop having Pap tests.

You should talk to your doctor about getting a Pap test more often if:

- You have a weakened immune system because of organ transplant, chemotherapy, or steroid use.
- Your mother was exposed to diethylstilbestrol (DES) while pregnant.
- You have had treatment for abnormal Pap results or cervical cancer in the past.
- You are HIV-positive.

Q: My Pap test was “abnormal.” What happens now?

A: Abnormal Pap test results usually do not mean you have cancer. Most often there is a small problem with the cervix. If results of the Pap test are unclear or show a small change in the cells of the cervix, your doctor may repeat the Pap test immediately, in 6 months or a year, or run more tests.

Some abnormal cells will turn into cancer. Treating abnormal cells that don't go away on their own can prevent almost all cases of cervical cancer. If you have abnormal results, talk with your doctor about what they mean. Treatment for abnormal cells is often done in a doctor's office during a routine appointment.

If the test finds more serious changes in the cells of the cervix, the doctor will suggest more tests. Results of these tests will help your doctor decide on the best treatment.

Q: How is a Pap test done?

A: Your doctor can do a Pap test during a pelvic exam. It is a simple and quick test. You will lie down on an exam table. Your doctor will put an instrument called a speculum into your vagina and will open it to see your cervix. He or she will then use a special stick or brush to take a few cells from the surface of and inside the cervix. The cells are placed on a glass slide and sent to a lab for testing. A Pap test may be mildly uncomfortable but should not be painful. You may have some spotting afterwards.

Q: How can I get a free or low-cost Pap test?

A: Pap tests are covered under the Affordable Care Act (www.hhs.gov/healthcare), the health care reform law passed in 2010. Depending on your insurance plan, you may be able to get tested at no cost to you.

- If you have insurance, check with your insurance provider to find out what's included in your plan. Ask about the Affordable Care Act (www.hhs.gov/healthcare).
- If you don't have insurance, enroll for insurance at the Health Insurance Marketplace (www.healthcare.gov) or find a program near you that offers free or low-cost Pap tests (apps.nccd.cdc.gov/dcpc_Programs/default.aspx?NPID=1).
- If you have Medicare, find out how often Medicare covers Pap tests and pelvic exams (www.medicare.gov/coverage/pap-tests-pelvic-exams-screening.html).
- If you have Medicaid, the benefits covered are different in each state, but certain benefits must be covered by every Medicaid program. Check with your state's program to find out what's covered (www.medicaid.gov).

For more information...

on Pap tests, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Cancer Information Service, National Cancer Institute

800-422-6237 • www.cancer.gov/aboutnci/cis/page1

American Cancer Society

800-227-2345 • www.cancer.org

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

800-230-7526 • www.ppfa.org

National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp

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This fact sheet was reviewed by Pamela Marcus, Ph.D., Epidemiologist, National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences; and Paul Doria-Rose, Ph.D., D.V.M., Epidemiologist, National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences.

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