

# CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING: PAP TESTS AND HPV TESTS

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common infection. Around 14 million people are infected with HPV each year. Some types of HPV cause warts like those found on hands. Other types are transmitted sexually and can infect the genital area.

Genital HPV is passed by direct skin-to-skin contact, most commonly occurring during vaginal and anal sex. Penetration doesn't have to occur; the skin-to-skin contact is enough to pass it.

While most HPV infections will clear on their own and won't cause any health problems, sometimes the infection does not clear and can cause cell changes on the cervix. These changes may lead to cervical cancer if they aren't found and treated. Regular screening tests, including Pap and HPV tests, can help find problems early and prevent cancer from developing.

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## Pap Test

A Pap test is a test to find abnormal cell changes on the cervix (cervical dysplasia) before they have a chance to turn into cancer. During a pelvic exam, a small brush or cotton tipped applicator and spatula will be used to take a sample of cervical cells. These cells are examined for abnormal cell changes.

Experts recommend that Pap tests begin no earlier than age 21. Many women are used to having Pap tests once a year; however, the recommendation is once every three years for women with normal Pap results.

A Pap test is not the same as a pelvic exam. During a pelvic exam, the healthcare provider looks at and feels the organs around your cervix to make sure

## OVERVIEW

- Most HPV infections are harmless. For most people the immune system usually clears HPV within a few months.
- Sometimes HPV infections don't clear naturally though. When this happens, women are at risk for cervical cancer.
- With regular screening with Pap and HPV tests, cervical cell changes can be found, treated (if needed), and cancer prevented.

their shape and size are normal. A Pap test is often part of a pelvic exam. If you're not sure whether your pelvic exam includes a Pap test, ask your healthcare provider.

## Preparing for a Pap Test

- Don't schedule your Pap test during or for a few days after your period. This may result in a Pap that does not show the cells clearly and may be read as "abnormal."
- Don't use vaginal creams, foams, gels, douches or tampons 48 hours (two days) before your Pap test. These products could cause an abnormal result.
- Don't have sex 48 hours (two days) before your Pap test. Sex can irritate the skin of the cervix or cause discharge (fluids) that can lead to an abnormal result.

## HPV Test

Unlike a Pap test, which only detects abnormal cell changes, an HPV test can identify high-risk types of HPV. High-risk types of HPV can lead to cervical cancer and this test helps healthcare providers know which women are at greatest risk

## Which Test Should I Have?

Screening begins with a Pap test at age 21 (screening is not recommended before 21), done every three years.

Co-testing with a Pap and an HPV test every five years is preferred in women ages 30 to 65. It's acceptable to screen women in this age range with a Pap test alone every three years.

The HPV test has been approved for use as primary cervical cancer screening for women age 25 and older.

Don't worry if these options seem confusing. Talk to your healthcare provider and they'll help you sort out which option is right for you. Remember the single most important thing is to be screened to begin with!

After age 65, people older than 65 who have had adequate prior screening and are not otherwise at high risk can stop screening. Cisgender women or transmasculine people who have had a hysterectomy (with removal of the cervix) also do not need to be screened, unless they have a history of a high-grade precancerous lesions.

## What if I need treatment?

Mild cervical cell changes are usually cleared naturally by the immune system, so healthcare providers often take a "watch and wait" approach rather than treatment. Moderate and severe cervical cell changes are usually treated. The choice of treatment depends on a number of factors.

Whether the plan is for a follow-up Pap test, an HPV test, a colposcopy or a biopsy, keep your appointment. Make sure that you understand the next step and why your healthcare provider chose it.

## Why did I get HPV?

Almost everyone who is sexually active will have HPV at some point, even though most never know it. People can be infected in the genital and anal areas.

An HPV diagnosis does not reflect on you, your character, lifestyle, or choices. It just means that like most others, you have a common virus that usually clears from the body without causing any issues. It's not at all unusual for HPV to be diagnosed in long-term relationships. Having HPV is part of being a normal, sexually active person!

## Learn More

Learn more about cervical cancer screening, HPV, and other STIs from the American Sexual Health Association, a trusted nonprofit organization that has advocated on behalf of those at risk for STIs for more than a century. Our websites include:

[www.ashasexualhealth.org](http://www.ashasexualhealth.org)

[www.iwannaknow.org](http://www.iwannaknow.org)

[www.quierosaber.org](http://www.quierosaber.org)

[www.nccc-online.org](http://www.nccc-online.org)

[www.askexpertsnow.com](http://www.askexpertsnow.com)

[www.YESmeansTEST.org](http://www.YESmeansTEST.org)

