

UAB Health Education

STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES

PAP SMEAR



Cervical cancer screening most often includes pap smear screening and sometimes includes human papillomavirus (HPV) testing. Pap smears test the cells of the cervix for signs of abnormal cervical changes that could lead to cervical cancer. HPV is a sexually transmitted virus that is linked to most cases of cervical disease. HPV testing tests to see if the DNA of the cells in the cervix are infected with high-risk types of HPV, which can lead to cervical cancer. Most women between the ages of 21 and 65 need to get regular pap smears or pap smears and HPV tests together.

RECOMMENDED SCREENING

Cervical cancer screening is recommended for most women between 21 and 65. You should feel comfortable talking to your provider about your personal level of risk. If screening is normal, the recommended frequency is as follows:

- Women 21-29 years of age should have a pap smear every 3 years.
- Women 30-65 should have either:
 - Pap smear and HPV co-testing every 5 years (preferred)
 - Pap smear every 3 years
- The following women do not need regular cervical cancer screening:
 - Women who are over 65 and have had consistent normal screening results over the last 10 years.
 - Women who have had a hysterectomy that included the removal of the cervix and who have never had cervical cancer.

RESULTS

Pap results will come back as normal, unclear or abnormal.

Normal: You do not need to do anything more until your next routine pap smear.

Unclear: You may need another pap smear sooner than usual, often 12 months after the initial test, depending on your individual results.

Abnormal: If your results are abnormal, you will need further testing to see if there are dangerous cervical changes or cancer present with a colposcopy.

HPV results show whether you have HPV and what type. They are usually reported with pap results, known as co-testing. It is most important to know if HPV is one of the high-risk types.

COLPOSCOPY

If you have an abnormal pap smear and HPV test results, you may need a colposcopy. In a colposcopy, your provider takes a closer look at your cervix with a magnifier called a colposcope. They will do a speculum exam and will apply a small amount of fluid to your cervix to be able to see any abnormal changes with the colposcope. If any abnormal sites are seen, they will take a small biopsy to check for cancer cells. This will allow them to form a treatment plan with you.

LOWERING YOUR RISK OF HPV

- The HPV vaccine is available and recommended to prevent most cancer-causing types of HPV.
- Use condoms to prevent HPV infection.
- Quit or avoid smoking tobacco.

RESOURCES

National Cancer Institute <https://www.cancer.gov/types/cervical/patient/cervical-screening-pdq>

Women's Health.gov <https://www.womenshealth.gov/a-z-topics/pap-hpv-tests>

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING A PAP SMEAR OR HPV TEST

THE PROCESS

Your provider will do a pap smear and/or HPV test in the exam room. You will lie on the exam table and place your feet in footrests on either side of the table to keep your legs bent and open. Your provider will place a tool called a speculum into your vagina in order to be able to see your cervix. They will then use a soft brush and a special stick to collect a sample of cells from the external opening of the cervix which is sent to the lab for testing. The cells for the pap and HPV tests can be collected at the same time.

WHAT YOU FEEL

During the speculum placement you will feel some pressure inside the vagina. If you have not had sexual intercourse or if you have pain with putting things in your vagina, you can ask your provider to use a smaller speculum or to perform the exam more slowly.

HOW YOU CAN PREPARE

You do not need to do anything special to prepare. Often you can still have a pap smear even when you are on your period, however contact your provider before your appointment if you have questions about being on your menstrual cycle.