

# What You Should Know About Cervical Cancer Screening

**C**ancer of the cervix (the passageway between the uterus and vagina) is caused by abnormal cells that can group to form malignant tumors. These kinds of tumors can spread throughout the body and may be life-threatening. Fortunately, if cervical cancer is found early, most women who have it can be cured. The best way to find it early is through regular cervical cancer screenings.

## What is Cervical Cancer Screening?

Cervical cancer screening is a test done regularly to check for abnormal cells that could lead to cancer. It involves having a Pap test (also called a Pap smear). A Pap test is a simple way a health care professional collects cells from the cervix and has them tested. All women should have Pap tests done as part of their routine health care.

## How am I Screened?

During a Pap test, a small device called a speculum is inserted into the vagina, slightly opening it so the health care professional can see the cervix. Then, a sample of cells is taken by gently rubbing a small swab against the cervical opening and inside the cervix. After smearing the cells on a glass slide, the sample is sent to a lab to be examined under a microscope. In a slightly different test, called a liquid-based Pap test, the collected cervical cells from the swab are placed into a liquid and sent to the lab. The Pap test (either the conventional or liquid-based) can feel a little uncomfortable, but does not hurt.

To make sure Pap test results are accurate, a Pap test should be scheduled 10 to 20 days after the first day of your period. Also, two days

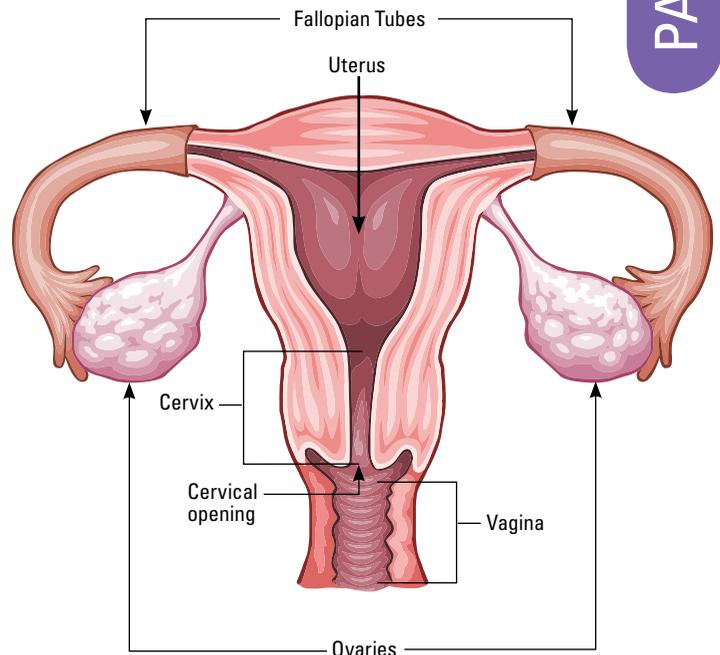


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before a Pap test, you should not douche; have sex; apply any vaginal creams (except as directed by a doctor); or use any birth control foams, jellies, or creams.

**All women should have Pap tests done as part of their routine health care.**

The Pap test only shows whether you have cervical cancer or might develop it. It does not show if you have a sexually transmitted disease (STD), vaginal infection, or other problems.

Virtually all cervical cancer is caused by human papillomavirus (HPV), so your health care professional may test for HPV, too—especially if you get an abnormal Pap test result or are over the age of 30. Even if you have had a shot for HPV, you should still have an HPV test.

## Cervical Cancer Screening

### When Should I Be Screened?

How often you should be screened depends on your age, sexual history, and overall health. Ask your health care professional what is right for you.

**Your First Test**— You should have your first Pap test at age 21 or 3 years after you first have sex, whichever occurs first.

**Your Next Tests**— If your Pap test results are normal, you should be screened again in 1 to 3 years. By the time you're 30, if you have had 3 normal Pap tests in a row, you can be screened every 2 to 3 years. Your health care professional should start regularly testing you for HPV at this age.

*Having a Pap test is the best way to prevent cervical cancer or to discover it early.*

**When to Stop**— You can stop having Pap tests when you're about 65 to 70 years old and have had normal results for 10 years. Women who have had a hysterectomy (surgery that removes the uterus and sometimes, the cervix) do not need Pap tests unless the uterus was removed because of cervical cancer, or if the cervix was not taken out.

**Who Needs Pap Tests More Often**— Some women need Pap tests more often than others. If you have human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or take certain drugs, you will need a Pap test every year. You should also have yearly Pap tests if you have a history of cervical cancer, or if you have had an organ transplant.

### What Happens if I Get an Abnormal Result?

If you have an abnormal Pap test, it does not mean you have cervical cancer. The Pap test has most likely detected abnormal cells that can be treated *before* they become cancer. If your test is abnormal, your health care professional will probably keep testing because abnormal cells sometimes go away on their own. If they do not, a procedure can be done that removes the abnormal tissue without harming your cervix or uterus.

### If You Haven't Been Screened Yet, Don't Wait!

Having a Pap test is the best way to prevent cervical cancer or to discover it early. It is an easy procedure that does not hurt, and is covered by most insurance companies. Don't wait to be screened—see your doctor today.

#### RESOURCES

##### National Cancer Institute

What You Need to Know About Cancer of the Cervix  
[www.cancer.gov/pdf/WYNTK/WYNTK\\_cervix.pdf](http://www.cancer.gov/pdf/WYNTK/WYNTK_cervix.pdf).

##### American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

The Pap Test  
[www.acog.org/publications/patient\\_education/bp085.cfm](http://www.acog.org/publications/patient_education/bp085.cfm).

##### American Cancer Society

Detailed Guide: Cervical Cancer  
[www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/CRI\\_2\\_3x.asp?dt=8](http://www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/CRI_2_3x.asp?dt=8).