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Colposcopy

What is a colposcopy?

A colposcopy is a way your doctor can examine your genitals, vagina and cervix closely. A colposcope is an instrument that shines a light on the cervix and magnifies the view for your doctor. At the beginning of the exam, you lie back and place your feet in the stirrups as you would for a Pap smear. Your doctor inserts a speculum into your vagina and opens it slightly so he or she can see your cervix. Then your doctor applies a vinegar solution to the cervix and vagina with a cotton ball or swab. The vinegar makes abnormal tissue turn white so your doctor can identify areas that may need further evaluation.

If your doctor sees areas of abnormal tissue during the colposcopy, he or she may also perform a biopsy. This involves removing small samples of tissue from any abnormal areas in or around the cervix. A specialist doctor called a pathologist will examine these samples.

It usually only takes 20 to 30 minutes for your doctor to complete a colposcopy and biopsy.

Why is a colposcopy performed?

A colposcopy is usually performed to help your doctor find the reason for an abnormal Pap smear.

Why is colposcopy important?

Colposcopy is important because it can detect cancer of the cervix at an early stage. Be sure to talk with your doctor after the test so that any problems are taken care of right away.

Is the procedure painful?

If your doctor takes a biopsy sample, you may feel mild cramps and pinching when he or she removes the abnormal tissue. Relaxing your muscles as much as possible and taking slow, deep breaths during the procedure may help. You may feel less discomfort if you take an over-the-counter pain reliever before the procedure. Ask your doctor whether you should take medicine, what kind to take, how much to take and when to take it. (When you ask, be sure to let your doctor know if you're pregnant or if you're allergic to aspirin or ibuprofen.)

How should I prepare to have a colposcopy?

You may be more comfortable if you empty your bladder and bowels before the procedure. Don't douche, use vaginal medications or tampons, or have sexual intercourse during the 24 hours before your appointment.

Does this procedure affect my ability to have children?

No. If your doctor takes a biopsy sample, the amount of tissue taken from your cervix is very small and removing it will not affect any future pregnancies. However, it is important to let your doctor know if you are pregnant now or even if you might be pregnant. This information will change the way your doctor does the procedure.

Will I have bleeding after a colposcopy?

You may have a dark-colored vaginal discharge after the colposcopy. If your doctor takes a biopsy sample, he or she will put a thick, brownish-yellow paste on that area to stop any bleeding. When this paste mixes with blood, it forms a thick black discharge. It's normal to have this discharge for a couple of days after the procedure. It's also normal to have a little spotting for at least two days after a colposcopy.

Can I use tampons after the procedure?

No. Don't use tampons or put anything in your vagina for at least 1 week after the procedure, or until your doctor tells you it's safe. Don't have sexual intercourse for at least 1 week.

When should I call my doctor?

Call your doctor right away if you have any of the following problems after your colposcopy:

- Heavy vaginal bleeding (using more than one sanitary pad per hour).
- Lower abdominal pain.
- Fever, chills or a bad-smelling vaginal odor.

When will I get the results of my colposcopy?

It usually takes 1 to 2 weeks for your doctor to get a report from the pathologist who looks at your biopsy samples. Your doctor's office will contact you when these results are available..