

Cervical Cancer Screening

Cervical cancer is cancer of the cervix, which is the tip of the uterus. Over 4,000 women will die of cervical cancer each year in the United States. Most of these cancers are caused by the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). Cervical cancer is highly preventable with screening by the Pap test.

What is the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)? HPV infection is sexually transmitted, occurring frequently in both men and women. Some types of HPV cause genital warts and other types cause cervical cancer. Most women will clear the HPV on their own, but occasionally infection persists that may cause cancer.

What is a Pap test? A Pap test involves collecting cells from the cervix. The Pap test can detect cervical cancer or precancerous changes that can lead to cancer. Cells collected during a Pap test can also be checked for HPV. If HPV is present, this finding suggests a greater future risk of cancer and may indicate need for more frequent Pap tests.

Who needs a Pap test? We recommend that Pap tests begin at age 21. Some organizations recommend starting Pap tests three years after a woman's first sexual intercourse. Pap tests should then be repeated at regular intervals until age 65. Women age 65 and older without previous abnormal Pap tests and without new risk of HPV infection do not need further Pap tests, since new cervical changes would be extremely unlikely.

How often should a Pap test be repeated? The interval depends on each woman's risk factors.

- Pap tests are repeated every 1 to 3 years; the frequency depends on the woman's age, number of sexual partners, previous Pap test and HPV test results, and other risk factors.
- Most women age 65 and older do not require further Pap tests if their previous Pap tests were normal.
- Women who have had their uterus and cervix removed do not require further Pap tests unless they had previous cervical or uterine cancer.

What Pap test results are possible?

- **Normal** – or “negative” Pap test result means no cell changes were found on the cervix.
- **Unclear** – or “inconclusive” Pap test means there were possible cell changes found on the cervix, which may be abnormal or may be associated with other types of changes in the body such as pregnancy, menopause, or infection.
- **Abnormal** – means cells with abnormal changes were found on the cervix.

What next steps are recommended based on the results of the Pap test?

Depending on the results of a Pap test, women may need to have another follow-up Pap test or have a **colposcopy**; an office procedure that allows the physician to look closely at the cervix and take biopsies (tissue samples) if needed.

Important note: Most women with abnormal cells do not have cancer, but need to have abnormal cells treated so they do not turn into cancer in the future. Please talk with your doctor about screening options and questions you may have. For more information you can go to:

- Sutter Health: <http://www.cancer.sutterhealth.org/information/cancertopics.html>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/pap/default.htm>