

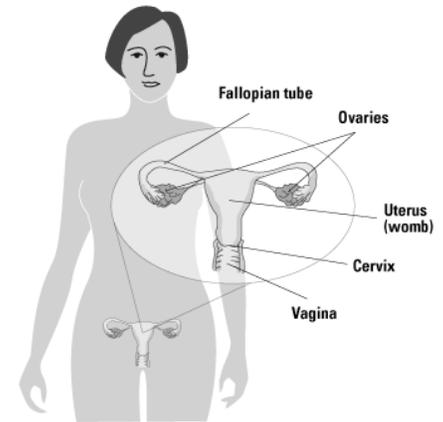
Cervical Health: The PAP Test

What is the Cervix?

The cervix is the muscle at the top of the vagina and the bottom of the uterus. This amazing muscle is strong enough to hold a full-term baby inside the uterus. It is designed to thin out and pull away when the baby is ready to be delivered.

What is the difference between a Pap test and a Pelvic Exam?

A PAP test is a test to look for signs of cervical cancer or any changes in the cells of the cervix. This test is done by taking a small sample of cells from the surface of the cervix and looking at them under a microscope. The PAP test is a screening test. A screening test tells us if a more careful examination of the cervix should be done.



A pelvic exam is an examination of the reproductive organs. During a pelvic exam, the clinician will examine a person's genitals, including the uterus, ovaries, cervix, and abdomen. The pelvic exam usually includes a speculum exam. This exam may be done for a person with abdominal pain, vaginal complaints, or pelvic pain.

How is a Pap test administered?

A PAP test is done during your well visit. For the PAP test, one lies on the exam table. The clinician gently slides an instrument called a speculum into the vagina. The speculum allows the clinician to view the cervix. With the speculum in place the clinician uses a soft brush to take a sample of cells from the cervix. This exam is usually not painful. A PAP test is not indicated at every well visit. Pap tests are done every 3 to 5 years.

What Causes Cervical Cancer?

Cancer of the cervix is caused by Human Papillomavirus (HPV). For a long time, we thought that all types of HPV caused cancer. Now we understand that there are many types of HPV and most of them are harmless. We have learned how to detect the small number of high-risk HPV. When there is no high-risk HPV we are not concerned about small changes in cervical cells. If we find evidence of a high-risk HPV then we will recommend a more thorough evaluation called a colposcopy. For people with high risk HPV but no evidence of cervical cancer, we do PAP tests more frequently.

Who Should Have a PAP test?

People over age 21 should have a PAP test every 3 years. People over 30 should have a pap test at least every 5 years. If someone has had an abnormal PAP test then they and their clinician will decide how frequently they should have a PAP test. Starting PAP tests when a person is under 21 is not a good idea, even if they have been sexually active before 21. In young people the cervix is still maturing and small changes are common but not significant. Starting PAP testing before 21 led to many unnecessary tests and a lot of unnecessary anxiety.

What Happens if the PAP test is Not Normal?

If the pap test is not normal then we will recommend a colposcopy.

What is Colposcopy?

A colposcopy is a careful examination of the entire cervix under microscopic magnification. For the person it is like having another pelvic exam. However, the clinician has a special microscope in the room and can very carefully look at the entire cervix to decide what should be done. The clinician may take another sample to evaluate (a biopsy). After the colposcopy the clinician may refer the person for treatment, if necessary. After colposcopy, the clinician will be able to recommend how frequently repeat PAP tests should be performed

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Can I Prevent Cervical Cancer?

- Having serious immunocompromising conditions, like HIV, can make it more difficult to clear HPV. You can reduce your risk by practicing safer sex.
- Cigarette smoking makes it harder to clear HPV. Talk to your clinician about quitting smoking.
- The Gardasil vaccination can reduce your risk of cervical cancer. This vaccine provides protection against most of the high-risk HPV. The vaccine does not provide protection against all high-risk HPV. You must still have regular PAP tests even if you had the Gardasil vaccination. Talk to a nurse or your clinician if you would like to get the vaccinations.

Can I Transmit HPV to My Partner?

HPV is transmitted by skin to skin contact. For most adults this occurs during intimate sexual contact. Studies show that most people will be exposed to HPV during their lives. There is no way to test people with a penis for high risk HPV at this time. It is impossible to know where it came from or who infected another person. We know that consistent condom use decreases the risk of transmission of HPV from one person to another. However, using condoms does not provide complete protection. The best way to protect yourself from having HPV damage the cervix is to have regular PAP tests.

Confused?

Understanding PAP tests can be very confusing. If you have more questions, please consider talking to one of our nurses or your clinician. You can call our Nurse Advice Line at 831-459-2591. You can schedule an appointment by calling 831-459-2500.