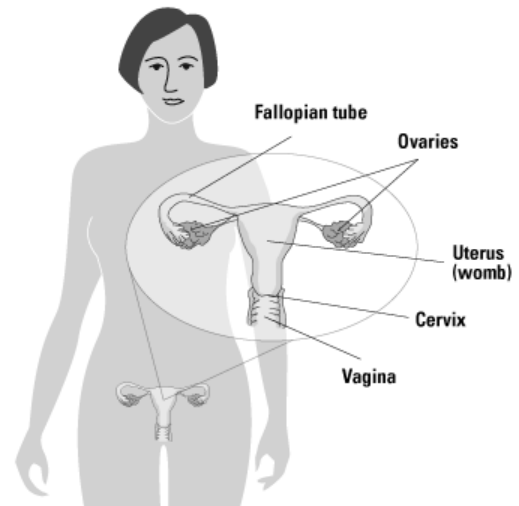


## Women's Health: The PAP Test

### What are the Cervix, a PAP test and a Pelvic Exam?

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. For some reason, the cervix is at risk for cancer.

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 female organs. During a pelvic exam, the clinician will examine a woman's genitals, including the uterus, ovaries, cervix, and abdomen. The pelvic exam usually includes a speculum exam. This exam may be done for a woman with abdominal pain, vaginal complaints, or pelvic pain.

### How Do You Do a PAP test?

A PAP test is done during your well woman exam. For the PAP test a woman lies on the exam table. The clinician gently slides an instrument called a speculum into the woman's vagina. The speculum allows the clinician to look at the cervix. A speculum is about the size of a tampon. With the speculum in place the clinician uses two small brushes to take a sample of cells from the cervix. This exam is not painful. A PAP test is not indicated at every well woman exam. Pap tests are done every 3 to 5 years.

### What Causes Cervical Cancer?

Cancer of the cervix is caused by Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). For a long time we thought that all 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 HPVs. 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 women with High Risk HPVs but no evidence of cervical cancer, we do PAP tests more frequently.

### Who Should Have a PAP test?

Women over age 21 should have a PAP test every 3 years. Women over 30 should have a pap test every 5 years. If a woman has had an abnormal PAP test she and her clinician will decide how frequently she should have a PAP test. Starting PAP tests when a woman is under 21 is not a good idea, even if she has been sexually active before 21. In young women 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 that a woman have a colposcopy.

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### What is Colposcopy?

A *colposcopy* is a careful examination of the entire cervix under microscopic magnification. For the woman it is like having another GYN 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 woman for treatment, if necessary. After colposcopy, the clinician will be able to recommend how frequently a woman should have repeat PAP tests

### Can I Prevent Cervical Cancer?

- Having serious immune compromising 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 by getting. This vaccine provides protection against most of the high risk HPVs. Gardasil is provided as a series of three injections over six months. The vaccine does not provide protection against all high risk HPVs. 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. However, sexual contact is not the only way to transmit the virus. Studies show that most people will be exposed to HPV during their lives. There is no way to test men 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 appointments by calling 831-459-2500.