

Bellingham Ob/Gyn Patient Hand-out - Pap Test vs. Annual Exam

CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING OVERVIEW — The Pap smear is a test used to screen women for cervical precancer or cancer. Testing for human papillomavirus (HPV) is another type of test for cervical cancer in women over age 30; HPV testing can be used alone or along with a Pap smear.

Pap smears can be lifesaving because they can find cervical cancer and precancer in the early stages, when it can be treated.

CERVICAL CANCER RISK FACTORS — The most important risk factor for cervical cancer is infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV). There are over 100 different types of HPV, however most types of HPV do not cause cancer. At least 80 percent of women are exposed to the HPV virus during their lifetime. Most of the time, the body's immune system gets rid of the virus before it does harm.

- Low risk types — HPV types 6 and 11 can cause genital warts and are low-risk types because they rarely cause cervical cancer.
- High risk types — HPV types 16 and 18 are considered high-risk types because they may cause cervical cancer in some women.

HPV is spread by direct skin-to-skin contact, including sexual intercourse, oral sex, anal sex, or any other contact involving the genital area (eg, hand to genital contact). It is not possible to become infected with HPV by touching an object, such as a toilet seat. A vaccine is available to prevent infection with certain types of HPV.

Most people who are infected with HPV have no signs or symptoms. Most HPV infections are temporary and resolve within two years. When the virus persists (in 10 to 20 percent of cases), there is a chance of developing cervical precancer or cancer. However, it usually takes many years for HPV infection to cause cervical cancer.

CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING TESTS — There are several ways to screen for cervical cancer. The traditional screening test is called a Pap smear.

Pap smear — The Pap smear is a method of examining cells from the cervix. The cervix is located at the lower end of the uterus.

To perform a Pap smear, a doctor or nurse will perform a pelvic exam and use a small brush or spatula to collect cells from the cervix.

HPV testing — An HPV test can be done along with a Pap smear or as a separate test. Like a Pap smear, the HPV test is done during a pelvic exam, using a small brush to collect a sample from the cervix.

If you are 30 years or older, your doctor or nurse may recommend HPV testing in addition to a Pap smear. If your HPV test and Pap smear are negative, repeat testing is not usually needed for 3 years. HPV testing may also be done if the results of your Pap smear results are unclear.

Women who are under age 30 are not usually tested for HPV because many women in this age group have temporary infections, which will go away without treatment.

Even if you have had a vaccine for human papillomavirus, you will still need cervical cancer screening.

Who should have a Pap smear? — In the past, experts recommended that every woman have a Pap smear every year. This has changed, and the need for a yearly test depends more on your age and past medical history.

Younger women — In the United States, the first Pap smear is recommended at age 21. The Pap is usually repeated every one to three years, depending upon your age and whether you have had an abnormal Pap smear or HPV test in the past.

Older women — Most experts feel that women who are 65 years or older can stop having Pap smears if:

- You have had Pap smears on a regular basis in the past
- You have had at least three normal Pap smears in a row and no abnormal Pap smears in the past 10 years

After hysterectomy — Women who have had a total hysterectomy (your uterus and cervix were removed) do not need a Pap smear, unless:

- The hysterectomy did not remove your cervix (eg, if the hysterectomy was "subtotal")
- Your hysterectomy was done because of cervical cancer or precancer
- You were exposed to diethylstilbestrol (DES) during your mother's pregnancy.

PAP SMEAR RESULTS — The results from your Pap smear will be available a few weeks after your visit. Pap smear results may be reported as:

Negative — Pap smears that have no abnormal, precancerous, or cancerous cells are labeled as "Negative for intraepithelial lesion or malignancy".

Abnormal results — Cervical cells may appear abnormal for a variety of reasons. For example, you may have a cervical infection, or you may have a precancerous area or even cervical cancer.

Follow up testing — If your Pap smear is abnormal, you may need further testing. If your Pap smear is normal but your HPV test is abnormal (positive), you may need follow up testing (colposcopy) or you may be advised to repeat the Pap and HPV test in one year; the best strategy depends on several individual factors.

WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION — Your healthcare provider is the best source of information for questions and concerns related to your medical problem.

A version of this article will be updated as needed every four months on our web site (www.uptodate.com/patients).

*****IMPORTANT NOTE *****

Regardless of the recommended screening interval for your pap test, you should still come to see your physician every year for your annual exam. This visit will be a complete gynecologic exam and will include a breast and pelvic exam. The pelvic exam involves looking at your external genitalia, visualizing your cervix, and feeling your uterus and ovaries.