



The American College of  
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS  
FAQ085  
SPECIAL PROCEDURES

## The Pap Test

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### What is a Pap test?

The Pap test, sometimes called a Pap smear or cervical cytology screening, is a simple test that can detect abnormal cervical cells. It is not the same as a **pelvic exam**. The Pap test allows early diagnosis and treatment so that the abnormal cells do not become cancer (see the FAQ [Cancer of the Cervix](#)). Routine Pap tests help decrease the chance that abnormal cells are missed. If a Pap test misses abnormal cells this time, they may be found on your next Pap test.

### How is the Pap test done?

A Pap test is simple and fast. It takes less than a minute to do. With the woman lying on an exam table, a **speculum** is used to open the vagina. This device gives a clear view of the cervix and upper vagina.

A small number of cells are removed from the cervix with a brush or other tool. The cells are put into a liquid and sent to a lab where they are placed on a glass slide. Sometimes, the cell sample is directly placed on a glass slide before it is sent to the lab. At the lab, the sample is examined using a microscope to see if abnormal cells are present. Many labs use a computer to examine the samples.

### Who should have a Pap test and how often?

You should start having Pap tests at age 21 years. How often you should have a Pap test depends on your age and health history:

- Women younger than 30 years should have a Pap test every 2 years.
- Women aged 30 years and older should have a Pap test every 2 years. After three normal Pap test results in a row, a woman in this age group may have Pap tests every 3 years if
  - she does not have a history of moderate or severe **dysplasia**
  - she is not infected with **human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)**
  - her **immune system** is not weakened (for example, if she has had an organ transplant)
  - she was not exposed to diethylstilbestrol (DES) before birth

### When can I stop having Pap tests?

It is not clear when a woman can stop having Pap tests. Some experts recommend that a woman who is aged 65 years or 70 years can stop having Pap tests after three normal results in a row within the past 10 years. However, if you have certain risk factors, you should continue to have routine Pap tests. These risk factors include being sexually active and having had multiple partners or a previous history of abnormal Pap test results.

## What happens if a Pap test result is abnormal?

You most likely will have additional testing after an abnormal Pap test result. This testing can be simply a repeat Pap test in 6 months or 12 months, a test for **human papillomavirus**, or a more detailed examination called a **colposcopy** (with or without a **biopsy**). If results of follow-up tests indicate precancerous changes, you may need treatment to remove the abnormal cells.

## Is the Pap test result always accurate?

As with any lab test, Pap test results are not always accurate. Sometimes, the results show abnormal cells when the cells are normal. This is called a “false-positive” result. A Pap test also may not detect abnormal cells when they are present. This is called a “false-negative” result. Many factors can cause false results:

- The sample may contain too few cells.
- There may not be enough abnormal cells to study.
- An infection or blood may hide abnormal cells.
- Douching or vaginal medications may wash away or dilute abnormal cells.

Your health care provider may suggest a repeat Pap test to check the results. A repeat test increases the likelihood that abnormal cells, if present, will be detected.

## Glossary

**Biopsy:** A minor surgical procedure to remove a small piece of tissue that is then examined under a microscope in a laboratory.

**Colposcopy:** Viewing of the cervix, vulva, or vagina under magnification with an instrument called a colposcope.

**Dysplasia:** A noncancerous condition that occurs when normal cells are replaced by a layer of abnormal cells. Dysplasia can be mild, moderate, or severe.

**Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV):** A virus that attacks certain cells of the body's immune system and causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

**Human Papillomavirus:** The name for a group of related viruses, some of which cause genital warts and are linked to cervical changes and cervical cancer.

**Immune System:** The body's natural defense system against foreign substances and invading organisms, such as bacteria that cause disease.

**Pelvic Exam:** A manual examination of a woman's reproductive organs.

**Speculum:** An instrument used to hold open the walls of the vagina.

## If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

**FAQ085:** Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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