



Embrace Ancient Wisdom Today

Screening for Cervical Cancer

The Pap Test



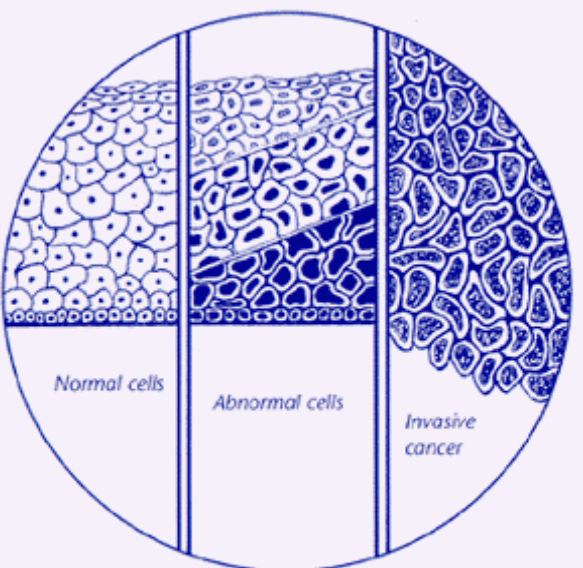
The **Papanicolaou (pap) test** is a screening test for cancer and precancerous cells of the cervix. If a Pap test shows changes, the result will be deemed as abnormal. This finding may require further evaluation and treatment by your physician depending on the results. Most abnormal findings on the cervix can be successfully treated when found early. The cervix is the lower portion of a woman's uterus that opens into the vagina (the birth canal). The cervix is covered by a thin layer of tissue. The cells that make up the tissue on the cervix grow and are replaced all the time. Some cells can become abnormal during this process.

The **Pap test** or cervical cytology screening is an important part of women's screening tests. This test evaluates cells taken from the cervix and helps your doctor to know if there are any abnormal cells on the cervix. Some abnormal cells may be precancerous or, rarely, cancer. Precancerous cells are changes in the cells that may, but do not always, become cancer if left untreated. A Pap test of the cervix does not detect cancer in other parts of the body. Most labs in the United States use the "Bethesda System" to describe Pap test results. This standard system helps doctors plan treatment if needed. With this system, your results will be placed in one of several groups:

- **Normal** (negative): There are no signs of cancer or precancerous cells
- **Atypical squamous cells (ASC)**: Some abnormal cells are seen.

These cells may be caused by an infection or irritation or may be precancerous. Rarely, are they cancerous.

- **Squamous intraepithelial lesion (SIL)**: Changes are seen in the cells that may show signs of precancerous cells. SIL can be low grade (LSIL) or high grade (HSIL). HSIL changes on a Pap test suggest a higher risk of precancerous cells than LSIL changes.
 - LSIL: Early, mild changes are seen in the cells.
 - HSIL: Moderate or severe cell changes are seen.
- **Atypical glandular cells**: Cell changes show that further testing is needed because of an increased risk of precancerous cells or cancer of the cervix, uterus, or other female reproductive organs.
- **Cancer**: Abnormal cells that are already cancerous have spread deeper into the cervix or to other tissues.



This enlarged view of cervical cells shows abnormal cells (middle) growing toward the surface of the cervix.

Abnormal Results

A Pap test result that is not normal is usually caused by an infection such as **human papilloma virus (HPV)** or other kinds of vaginal irritation or infections. It also may be caused by a change in cells called squamous intraepithelial lesion (SIL) or precancerous cells. SIL

also may be referred to as cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) or dysplasia. There are many different terms to describe abnormal Pap test results

Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion

SIL is found in women of all ages. It can range from mild, moderate, and severe to carcinoma in situ (CIS). CIS is not yet cancer, however, can progress to cancer if untreated

You are at increased risk for SIL if you:

- Have human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)
- Have a weakened immune system
- Have a history of dysplasia or certain cancers
- Have a mother who took diethylstilbestrol or DES (a medication given to many pregnant women in the 1950s and 1960s) when she was pregnant with you.

Human Papilloma virus Infection

Human papilloma virus infection can cause abnormal Pap test results. However, most women infected with HPV have normal Pap test results. It is a very common infection that can be passed from person to person. There is no treatment for this type of infection. Many people have it and, in many cases, it does not cause problems. Some types of HPV can be spread through sexual contact.

Certain types of HPV are linked to cancer in both women and men. Some are known to be a major cause of cancer of the cervix. Certain types of HPV also may be linked to cancer of the anus, vulva, vagina, and penis. If you have concerns about HPV infection, talk to your doctor.

In some cases, an HPV test can be done to help clarify the Pap test results. A negative HPV test result means that the ASC cell changes that were seen are not related to precancerous cells. Most women with HPV do not develop precancerous cells of the cervix. Women who have an abnormal Pap test result and a positive test result for certain types of HPV will need further testing.

Further Testing

A woman who receives an abnormal Pap test result may need further testing. Sometimes you may only need a repeat Pap test because many cell changes go away on their own. The key to treating cervical changes is finding them early. The earlier a problem is found, the more successful the treatment. Regular pelvic exams and Pap tests can help find problems early. Further testing methods, such as **colposcopy** and **biopsy**, can help identify the reason for the abnormal test result.

Colposcopy

Colposcopy is a test performed by your doctor to look at the cervix through a special device similar to a microscope. It can detect problems of the cervix that cannot be seen with the naked eye. Colposcopy is used to help diagnose SIL and cervical cancer.

For colposcopy, a speculum like the one used during a Pap test is placed in the vagina. The colposcope remains outside of the vagina, but is used to see the cervix. The cervix is painted with a mild vinegar solution that sometimes causes a slight burning. This liquid makes abnormal cells on the cervix easier to see.

Biopsy

If an area of abnormal cells is seen, your doctor may decide that a cervical biopsy is needed. For a biopsy, the doctor removes a small sample of tissue and sends it to a lab for diagnosis. You may have a

pinching or cramping feeling during this procedure. Colposcopy with biopsy will help your doctor decide if treatment is needed.

Treatment

Treatment of cervical changes depends on the severity of the problem. For instance, LSIL may not need to be treated. A woman may just need to have repeat Pap tests. HSIL has an increased risk of progressing to cancer and may need to be treated with minor surgery. With some techniques, the abnormal cervical tissue is removed and sent to a lab for diagnosis confirmation. It may take a few days to get the results. With other techniques, such as freezing or laser, there is no sample taken.

Electrosurgical Excision Procedure

Electrosurgical excision often is used for women with HSIL. This method is sometimes called a loop electrosurgical excision procedure (LEEP). LEEP often is done in the doctor's office.

Because there is minor discomfort, a local anesthetic is given. For this procedure, a thin wire loop that carries an electric current is used to remove abnormal areas of the cervix. This electric energy also is used to close off the blood vessels on the surface of the cervix. This lowers the risk of bleeding after the procedure.

Cone Biopsy

Another technique used to obtain a tissue sample is a cold knife cone biopsy. In this procedure, a cone-shaped wedge of the cervix is removed. General or spinal anesthesia may be used for a cone biopsy. The procedure usually is done in a hospital or outpatient surgery clinic. You should be able to go home the same day.

Freezing and Laser Treatment

With cryotherapy, abnormal tissue is frozen and later sheds. Sometimes, laser treatment in which a beam of light destroys abnormal tissue is used.

Risks

Although problems seldom occur after treatment for cervical changes, there are some risks. You may be at increased risk for preterm birth or infertility. There is also a risk of infection after the procedure. You should contact your doctor if you have any of the following:

- Heavy bleeding (more than your normal period)
- Bleeding with clots
- Severe abdominal pain
- Fever (more than 100.4°F)
- Foul-smelling discharge
- No period within 4 weeks (if your menstrual cycle was regular before treatment)

Follow-up

It may take a few weeks for your cervix to heal. While your cervix heals, you may have:

- Vaginal bleeding (less than a normal menstrual flow)
- Mild cramping
- A brownish-black discharge
- A watery discharge (with cryotherapy)

For a few weeks after the procedure, you should not have sex or use tampons or douches.

After treatment for cervical changes, your doctor will suggest frequent checkups and Pap tests. You should continue to see your doctor regularly.

If you are concerned about abnormal Pap test results, talk to your doctor. Most problems that cause abnormal Pap test results, when found early, can be treated. Routine exams and Pap tests are the best ways to diagnose cervical problems.