



Pap Smear Test

What is a Pap Smear (test)? The Pap smear is a test developed by Dr. Papanicolaou as a simple screening test for cancer of the cervix. Cancer of the cervix at one time was the leading cause of cancer death among women. The Pap test is a screening test which detects early or precancerous changes in the cells of the cervix in women who have no symptoms. It has been dramatically successful in decreasing the incidence of cancer of the cervix and deaths from this disease.

Why do I need to have a Pap smear? Cancer of the cervix is caused by a virus called human papilloma virus (HPV). This is the most common sexually transmitted infection in women and men. Most people who carry HPV have no symptoms and may transmit the infection without knowing it. The Pap smear is the only way to detect this problem in the early stages while simple treatments can prevent the development of cervical cancer.

How often should I have a Pap smear? Pap smears should be performed on all sexually active women or by age 18-21 if a woman has never been sexually active. Most experts feel that Pap smears should be done annually on women until age 30 and then every one to three years according to your doctor's recommendation. Pap smears are often combined with the "annual exam" which includes thyroid, breast, and pelvic exams.

Is a pelvic exam the same as a Pap smear? No. A pelvic exam includes a speculum exam of the vagina and cervix and a bimanual exam to feel for the uterus and ovaries. The Pap test is a gentle scraping of the surface of the cervix to obtain cells for examination on a slide. Pelvic exams are often done for sexually transmitted disease (STD) screening, vaginitis, pelvic pain or other problems and do not always include a Pap test.

Can the Pap smear show any other problems? Pap smears will sometimes detect viral or bacterial infections of the cervix and vagina. STD screening for other infections such as Chlamydia or gonorrhea are often performed at the same time but require a separate test. The Pap test is largely only for the detection of cancer or precancerous changes (called **dysplasia**) of the cervix.

Are there different degrees of abnormal Pap smears? Abnormal Pap smears are classified into several categories according to the degree of cellular changes. These include:

- **ASCUS** (atypical squamous cells). This is the mildest abnormality and suggests slightly abnormal cells of unclear significance.
- **LGSIL/HPV/CIN 1** (low-grade or mild dysplasia). This result indicates cellular changes consistent with an active HPV infection in the early stages.
- **HGSIL/CIN 2-3** (high-grade or moderate/severe dysplasia). This result suggests significant cellular changes of a precancerous nature requiring prompt evaluation and treatment.

What if my Pap smear is abnormal? In the mild categories, a repeat pap smear may be all that is necessary. Pap smears showing LGSIL or HGSIL generally require follow-up with a colposcopy exam with a gynecologist to determine the exact extent of the problem and whether treatment is needed.