



Details of Cervical Cancer Screening

For additional information on cervical cancer screenings, please visit www.cancer.org.

Finding Changes Before They Become Cancer

A to prevent cancer of the cervix is to have testing (screening) to find pre-cancers before they can turn into cancer. The Pap test (or Pap smear) is the most common way to do this. If a pre-cancer is found and treated, it can stop cervical cancer before it really starts. Most cervical cancers are found in women who have not had Pap tests when they should.

1) Pelvic Exam versus Pap Test

Many people confuse pelvic exams with Pap tests, perhaps because they are often done at the same time. The pelvic exam is part of a woman's regular health care. During this exam, the doctor looks at and feels the reproductive organs. Some women think that they do not need pelvic exams once they have stopped having children. This is not true.

The pelvic exam may help find diseases of the female organs. But it won't find cancer of the cervix at an early stage. To do that, the Pap test is needed. The Pap test is often done just before the pelvic exam.

Help With Pap test Costs

A program called the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP) provides testing to women without health insurance for free or at very little cost. Each state's Department of Health has information on this program.

How is a Pap test done?

The doctor uses a metal or plastic instrument to open the vagina. Then a sample of mucus and cells is lightly scraped from the cervix. This sample is sent to the lab to be looked at under a microscope. If anything unusual is found your doctor will let you know. Because the system for reporting Pap test results is complex, ask your doctor to explain your results in a way that is clear to you. If your test shows something not normal, your doctor will want to do other tests to find out what is happening.

Additional Information

Even though the Pap test is the best way to prevent cervical cancer or to find it early, it is not perfect. Because even good labs can miss some cell changes, you should have the test as often as the ACS guidelines recommend. Women who are no longer having children still need to have pelvic exams and Pap tests.

Doctors have several methods to treat women with abnormal Pap test results. These methods include cryosurgery (use of a metal probe to freeze and kill the abnormal cells) and laser surgery. If you have an abnormal Pap test, ask your doctor to explain exactly what that means in your case and what treatment options you have.

2) The HPV DNA Test

Infection with HPV is the most important risk factor for cancer of the cervix. Doctors can now test for the types of HPV that are most likely to cause this cancer. They do this by looking at the DNA of cervical cells. Samples of cells are collected in much the same way as for the Pap test. This test is used in 2 ways:

- It can be used as a screening test (along with the Pap test) in women over 30. It does not replace the Pap test. It is not used for women under 30 because it's not as useful then. Younger women who are having sex are much more likely to have HPV, most of which will go away by itself.
- It can also be used in women with slightly abnormal Pap test results to see if more testing or treatment might be needed.