

The HPV Test and Pap Smears



The Pap smear is an important clinical tool for detecting cervical cancer. Recent advances in cervical cancer screening and research have prompted the use of the HPV test in conjunction with the Pap smear in women age 30 and over. Below are “frequently asked questions” relative to both tests.

What is HPV?

- HPV (Human Papilloma Virus) is a very common virus that is spread through genital skin-to-skin contact; it is estimated that 80% of women get HPV by age 50.
- Although most cases of HPV resolve without further problems, **certain types of HPV can cause cervical cancer.**

What is the difference between a Pap smear and the HPV test?

- A **Pap smear** looks for abnormal cell changes on the cervix that occur as a result of a persistent high-risk HPV infection. The **HPV test** looks for the HPV infection itself, even if it hasn't yet caused abnormal cells. Both tests are performed from the same cell specimen collected during your visit.

Why is there a need for two tests in women over 30?

- **We use the HPV test with the Pap test for women age 30 and over to assess more accurately the risk of cervical cancer.** Women who test negative for high-risk HPV AND have a normal Pap test have virtually no risk of developing cervical cancer before their next scheduled visit.
- Knowing your HPV status and Pap results helps you and your provider determine how often you should be screened; some women will not need another Pap/HPV screening until three years have passed. **However, the frequency of your routine gyn exam (usually annually) will NOT change.**

If it is determined that my next Pap smear should be in three years, should I return every year for my annual routine exam?

- Yes, we recommend an exam every year as routine gyn exams include much more than a Pap smear/HPV test. Your annual exam allows you and your provider to address health maintenance concerns and appropriate screenings to promote good health.

What do the results mean?

- If your initial HPV test is positive, do not be alarmed. The virus is fairly common and will usually be cleared by your immune system. It is possible to have a positive HPV test and normal Pap smear, or vice versa. Your provider will determine the best course of action to monitor your cervical health.
- Your HPV status is not a reliable indicator of you or your partner's sexual behavior. HPV can lie dormant in cervical cells for many years before becoming an active infection.

What are the recommendations for women under 30?

- In patients **age 29 and younger**, the annual Pap smear remains the recommended screening test. Routine HPV testing isn't necessary in this population because HPV infections in younger women usually go away on their own without causing problems.

What are the recommendations for women over 70?

- Women age 70 and older should discuss the need for cervical cancer screening with their provider. A Pap test may or may not be medically necessary.

What are the recommendations for women who have had a hysterectomy?

- Depending on the type of hysterectomy you had and your medical history, there may still be the need for a screening Pap test (especially if your cervix was not removed during the hysterectomy).

Please discuss your question or concerns about cervical cancer screening with your practitioner today.