



PAP SMEAR

Q. WHAT IS A PAP SMEAR?

A. The Pap test (sometimes called a Pap smear) is a way to examine cells collected from the cervix and vagina. This test can show the presence of infection, inflammation, abnormal cells, or cancer.

Q. HOW IS THE PAP SMEAR DONE?

The Pap smear is a very simple, but often life saving, test that requires only a few minutes to complete. To maximize the results of the Pap smear, schedule the exam for a time when you will not be menstruating. Also, you should not douche for several days prior to the test.

- A nurse will ask you about your health
- You will go into the exam room. You will have a gown to put on and a sheet to cover you.
- You will lie down on the table with a sheet over your legs and stomach. You will let your knees fall to the side while putting your feet in holders called stirrups.
- The doctor will look at your vaginal area to see if you have any signs of infection or other problems.
- The doctor will slide a thin piece of plastic or metal (a speculum) that looks like a duck bill into your vagina to check inside.
- During the Pap test, the doctor will use a small brush to take a few cells from your cervix (the opening to the womb). A lab will check these cells for cancer or other problems. If cancer is found early, it is easier to cure.
- After the Pap test, the doctor will check your tubes, ovaries, and uterus (womb) by putting two gloved fingers inside your vagina. With the other hand, the doctor will feel from the outside for any lumps or tenderness. This takes only a few minutes.
- The exam is over and you can get dressed.
- Be sure to ask any questions before the nurse or doctor leaves the room.

Q. HOW OFTEN SHOULD I GET A PAP TEST?

A. Get a Pap test every year, unless you are in a low-risk group for cervical cancer and your doctor advises that it is okay to have one this often. Patients in the low-risk group are those that have had only one sexual partner in their life and who have not had a previous abnormal Pap smear. If you are in this group, and you have had three consecutive annual Pap smears that were normal, you are probably safe in having a Pap smear every three years rather than every year.

Q. WHEN SHOULD I HAVE MY FIRST PAP SMEAR?

A. Your first Pap smear should be done at the time you become sexually active or when you become 18 years of age. There is no upper age limit for the Pap test. Even women who have gone through the change of life (menopause) need a Pap test every year.

Q. HOW IS A PAP TEST DONE?

A. A Pap test is simple, quick, and painless; it can be done in a doctor's office, a clinic, or a hospital. While a woman lies on an exam table, the clinician inserts a speculum into her vagina to open it. To do the test, a sample of cells is taken from in and around the cervix with a wooden scraper or a small cervical brush or broom. The specimen (or smear) is placed on a glass slide or rinsed in liquid fixative and sent to a laboratory for examination.

Q. DO I NEED A PAP SMEAR IF I HAVE HAD A HYSTERECTOMY?

A. Women who have had a hysterectomy (surgery to remove the uterus, including the cervix) should talk with their doctor about whether or not to continue to have regular Pap tests. If the hysterectomy was performed for treatment of a precancerous or cancerous condition, the end of the vaginal canal still needs to be sampled for abnormal changes. If the uterus (including the cervix) was removed because of a noncancerous condition such as fibroids, routine Pap tests may not be necessary. However, it is still important for a woman to have regular gynecologic examinations as part of her health care.

Q. WHEN SHOULD THE PAP TEST BE DONE?

A. A woman should have this test when she is not menstruating; the best time is between 10 and 20 days after the first day of the menstrual period. For about 2 days before a Pap test, she should avoid douching, or using vaginal medicines or spermicidal foams, creams, or jellies (except as directed by a physician). These may wash away or hide abnormal cells.

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