

Student Health

Pap Test and HPV Information Sheet

What is a pap test? During a pelvic exam, a healthcare provider collects a sample of cervical cells with a brush. A pathologist then examines the cells to determine if they are regular or irregular in their appearance. This is a screening test for both HPV and cervical cancer.

When should I get my first pap test and how often thereafter? Although different medical groups vary slightly with their recommendations, in general:

- INITIATION: Age 21 years
- AGE 21 – 29: Every 3 years
- AGE 30 - 65: Pap and HPV testing every 5 years

What is HPV? The human papillomaviruses (HPV) are a group of more than 100 related viruses. The papillomaviruses may cause warts, or papillomas, which are noncancerous growths. Some types of HPV are oncogenic (high risk strains), meaning associated with certain types of cancer. Cervical cancer is one such HPV related disease. HPV may also play a role in cancers of the anus, vulva and mouth/throat.

How does a person get HPV? Genital HPV infections are very common and are sexually transmitted. More than 30 types of HPV can be passed from one person to another through skin-to-skin contact in the genital area. HPV can be spread even if there is no intercourse.

How long does someone have HPV? Most HPV infections go away without any treatment over the course of a few years. Your body's immune system fights off the infection and the HPV goes away on its own. However, HPV infection can sometimes persist for many years. Persistent infection may cause cervical cancer, although some infections persist without progression to cancer.

If I have HPV, what are the symptoms? Most cervical HPV infections are without symptoms. However, if abnormal cells are seen on a pap test this may be an indication of a cervical HPV infection.

Can I be tested for HPV? Certain changes seen on a pap test are suggestive of an HPV infection (see back). An HPV test can be performed using the same cells from a pap test. HPV testing is currently only recommended for certain pap results or for patients 30 and older as part of "co-testing" (pap plus HPV testing).

What are genital warts and how are they related? Genital warts (condylomata acuminata) are abnormal growths involving the genital or anal regions. Most are caused by HPV-6 and HPV-11 strains. These are different strains than those which cause cervical cancer. Warts may appear from several weeks to several years after having sexual contact with someone who is infected with HPV.

If I have HPV, does that mean I have or could develop cervical cancer? A positive HPV test result does NOT mean that someone has or will develop cervical cancer. The test only indicates that a high-risk HPV strain is present, and you should be followed closely to make sure the infection resolves. Persistent HPV infection can lead to cervical cancer in a small percentage of people who do not have appropriate follow-up or treatment. Smoking decreases your chances of clearing HPV.

How can I prevent an HPV infection? The best way to avoid an HPV infection is by avoiding skin-to-skin contact in the genital area. Condoms can lower the chance of contracting HPV, as well as HIV, herpes, gonorrhea and chlamydia. Limiting the number of sexual partners, you have can drastically lower your chance of getting HPV. The HPV vaccine is extremely effective in preventing HPV.

How can HPV be treated? Usually, cervical HPV does not need to be treated, but in the small percentage of patients with persistent, progressive HPV, treatment is available. There is a small increased risk of preterm labor and low birth-weight babies for patients who have had a surgical procedure removing HPV. Thus, in most young patients still considering childbirth in the future, a conservative approach allowing the infection to clear on its own is often recommended.

If HPV goes away, can I get it again? Yes, even if you have cleared one strain of HPV you can contract another strain.

Should my partner who has a penis be tested for HPV? The HPV test is not currently used for those with a penis. However, the HPV vaccine is recommended for everyone between the ages of 9-26.

- ***Is the HPV vaccine right for me?*** HPV vaccine is recommended for routine vaccination at age 11 or 12 years. ACIP also recommends vaccination for everyone through age 26 years if not adequately vaccinated when younger. For adults ages 27 through 45 years, clinicians can consider discussing HPV vaccination with people who are most likely to benefit. HPV vaccination is given as a series of either two or three doses, depending on age at initial vaccination.

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Pap Test Results

Normal- Cervical cells are normal in appearance without evidence of HPV. See front for timing of follow-up.

ASC-US (Atypical Squamous Cells of Undetermined Significance) - the cells do not appear completely normal. Sometimes these changes can be due to an HPV infection. Thus, further HPV testing may be performed. If high risk HPV is found, depending on your age, colposcopy (see below) may be recommended.

ASC-H-(Atypical Squamous Cells cannot exclude a High Grade Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion) - Cervical cells appear different in size and shape compared with normal cells. A colposcopy (see below) is recommended.

AGC (Atypical Glandular Cells) - Glandular cells of the cervix produce mucus and are in the opening in the center of the cervix as well as in the uterine lining. With an AGC pap, the glandular cells are abnormal. A colposcopy (see below) is usually recommended.

LSIL (Low grade Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion) - Early (low grade) changes are seen in the size and shape of the cervical squamous cells. LSIL results are caused by an HPV infection and are very common. Most LSIL lesions will resolve without intervention within months to several years. Depending on your age, colposcopy (see below) may be recommended to confirm that the changes are only mild.

HSIL (High-grade Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion)-Cervical cells appear very different in size and shape compared with normal cells. HSIL are more serious changes due to HPV infection. Many HSIL lesions will resolve within several year. However, if HSIL changes do not resolve and are left untreated, they could eventually lead to cervical cancer. HSIL requires colposcopy (see below) with biopsy in patients of all ages.

What is a colposcopy? A colposcopy is a procedure during which a magnifying instrument (colposcope) is used to further examine the vagina and cervix. A patient is placed in a similar position as for a pap test. Various solutions, including saline, dilute vinegar and iodine can be applied to the cervix, in an attempt to look for abnormal areas (evidence of HPV infection). If medically indicated a biopsy can be performed.

If you have additional questions, please consult your provider at the Vanderbilt Student Health Center.