

Pap tests for all women

Every woman between 18 and 70 years of age who has ever been sexually active should have a Pap test every two years, even if they have had the cervical cancer vaccine. Regular Pap tests (also called Pap smears) prevent more than 1,200 women from developing cervical cancer each year, because the test can detect abnormalities before they develop into cancer.

Most Pap test results are normal. Abnormal results are usually due to conditions that clear up naturally. If they don't, they can usually be treated easily.

The Pap test detects abnormal cells in the cervix

The early stages of cervical cell changes have no symptoms. The only way to know if you have abnormal cells in your cervix is to have a Pap test.

Risk factors for developing cervical cancer include:

- The presence of some types of the human papillomavirus (HPV) on the cervix
- Smoking
- The presence of sexually transmitted infections such as Chlamydia
- Early age of first intercourse
- Early age of first childbirth
- Number of sexual partners
- Long-term use of the contraceptive pill.

Cervical cells pass through a series of changes before they become cancerous and the Pap test is usually able to detect these. The medical term for these changes or abnormalities is squamous intraepithelial lesion. The degree of abnormality in the cells is classified as either 'low-grade' squamous intraepithelial lesion (mild) or 'high-grade' intraepithelial lesion (moderate to severe).

Abnormal Pap test results

Only a small number of Pap tests return an abnormal result. Very few of these are due to cervical cancer and most abnormalities indicate common infections or conditions that clear up naturally.

Almost all cervical cell abnormalities and cervical cancers are caused by HPV. HPV is very common, but most women with genital HPV will **not** develop cervical cancer. Four out of five women will have HPV at some time in their lives. In fact, genital HPV is so common it could be considered a normal part of being sexually active.

Treating abnormalities

Most minor (low-grade) abnormalities are caused by HPV and are usually monitored by more frequent Pap tests. Some abnormalities will require further investigation through colposcopy. This involves using an instrument called a colposcope, which gives a magnified view of the cervix. You may be referred to a colposcopy clinic or a gynaecologist for this examination.

More serious (high-grade) abnormalities will require treatment to remove the abnormal cells. Your doctor or gynaecologist will recommend the best treatment for you. Treatment usually requires only a few hours in a hospital or clinic. This treatment does not affect your fertility.

Women should have regular Pap tests

Women should start having Pap tests two years after commencing sexual activity or at age 18, whichever comes later. Young women who have had the cervical cancer vaccine should still have regular two-yearly Pap tests, as the vaccine does not protect against all cancer-causing HPV types or those to which you may already have been exposed prior to vaccination. Lesbians also need regular Pap tests.

Some women who have had a hysterectomy still need to have regular Pap tests – check with your healthcare professional. Menopause does not protect women from cervical cancer. In fact, most cases of cervical cancer occur in women older than 50 years. Women who are in a long-term relationship or are no longer sexually active should still have Pap tests.

Studies suggest that women with disabilities may be less likely to have regular Pap tests than other women in the community. They may experience a number of barriers in accessing cervical screening services. However it is important that all women with disabilities who are aged 18–70 have regular Pap tests if they have ever been sexually active.

All women need to have Pap tests every two years until the age of 70. The Pap test is currently the best protection against cervical cancer for women who have ever had sex.

Where to get help

- Your doctor or nurse Pap test provider
- PapScreen Victoria – for online advice and information
- The Cancer Council Helpline Tel. 13 11 20
- Multilingual Cancer Information Line Tel. (03) 9209 0169
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100 or 1800 013 952

Things to remember

- All women aged between 18 and 70 years should have a Pap test every two years, even if they have had the cervical cancer vaccine.
- Pap tests are an easy and effective way to detect cell changes that may lead to cancer.
- Most abnormal test results are due to common infections or conditions that clear up naturally.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

PapScreen Victoria - Cancer Council Victoria

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