

The Pap Test – Frequently Asked Questions

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What is a Pap test?

A Pap test is an important screening test for cervical cancer. When a Pap test is done, some cells from the cervix (the opening to the uterus) are taken for examination. The cells are looked at for any changes that could lead to cancer.

Who should have Pap tests?

If you are 25 years or older, have been sexually active and have a cervix, you need to have regular Pap tests. Pregnant women and women who have sex with women also need regular Pap tests.

You may not need to have regular Pap tests if :

- you have had a total hysterectomy and have never been treated for cervical dysplasia or diagnosed with cervical cancer.
- you are at least 70 years of age and have a history of normal Pap test results.

Your doctor or health care provider can tell you more.

What do you mean by sexually active?

Sexual activity means vaginal intercourse, vaginal-oral sex, vaginal-digital sex (digital = fingers), or sharing of sex toys or devices.

When should I have my first Pap test?

You should have your first Pap test within 3 years of becoming sexually active or at the age of 25 – whichever happens later.

If you have never been sexually active, you do not need to have Pap tests.

Why is it safe to wait for three years after becoming sexually active before having my first Pap test?

A Pap test is done to see if there are abnormal or, more rarely, cancerous cells on a person's cervix. Cervical cancer is caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is usually spread by sexual contact and cleared from the body naturally without causing any problems. The virus can remain present but dormant in the body, and only cause problems years later. This is why a Pap test should be done on all women who are, or have ever been, sexually active. However, because invasive cervical cancer takes a long time to develop after exposure to HPV, experts agree that the Pap test can safely be delayed until three years after becoming sexually active.

How often do I need to get a Pap test?

- In general, you should have a Pap test every three years.

- If you have ever been treated for abnormal cells (cervical dysplasia) or cancer of the cervix, you need yearly Pap tests for life.
- If you are experiencing irregular or unusually heavy periods, spotting or bleeding between periods, after sexual activity, after douching, or after menopause, talk to your family doctor or health care provider.

Where can I get a Pap test done?

Pap tests can be done by your family doctor, a nurse practitioner, a sexual health centre, a well woman clinic, or a walk-in clinic. For a list of sexual health centres or well woman clinics in your area, visit the Cancer Care Program website at www.nscancercare.ca or call 1-888-480-8588.

How can I find out my Pap screening history?

A confidential registry of all Pap tests done in Nova Scotia (since 1978) is kept by the Cervical Cancer Prevention Program. You can request a copy of your Pap test history (tests performed in Nova Scotia) by calling the Program at 1-888-480-8588 or 902-473-7438.

Does an abnormal Pap mean I have cancer?

No. An abnormal Pap means that there are some abnormal cervical cells that need to be looked at more closely. There are many possible reasons for abnormal cells including an infection, hormonal changes, or an abnormal growth of cells. A doctor may discuss further monitoring or treatment.

Do I need to have a Pap test in order to get birth control?

No.

I have a new sexual partner; should I have a Pap test?

Having a new sexual partner is not a reason to have a Pap test.

Will I be tested for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) when I have a Pap test?

Sometimes, but you need to ask to be certain.

Do I need a Pap test if I am menopausal?

If you are under 70, you still need a Pap test even though you have stopped having periods.

Do I still need a Pap test if I've had a hysterectomy?

- If you have had a subtotal hysterectomy (cervix still present), you should be screened every three years;

- If you have had a total hysterectomy (cervix removed) and have had treatment for cervical dysplasia or a history of cancer of the cervix, you should be screened annually (yearly) for life;
- If you have had a total hysterectomy and have not been treated for cervical dysplasia or a history of cancer of the cervix you do not require Pap tests.

What are HPV and the HPV vaccine?

HPV is a common, sexually transmitted virus. There are over 100 types of HPV, and about 40 types of HPV may live in the genital area. Most often HPV does not cause any symptoms or harm and goes away on its own, but some types may cause genital and anal warts, and cancer over time. For more information about HPV and/or the HPV vaccination, contact your local Public Health office, or visit www.nscancercare.ca.

How can I protect myself from cervical cancer?

- Have regular Pap tests
- Delay age of first sexual activity
- Limit number of sexual partners
- Choose not to smoke
- Practice safe sex to reduce exposure to HPV, use a latex barrier (e.g. condom or dam) when having sexual intercourse
- Discuss the HPV vaccine with your health care provider

For more information:

Contact the Cervical Cancer Prevention Program (Nova Scotia Health Authority Cancer Care Program) at www.nscancercare.ca or call 1-888-480-8588.

Looking for more health information?

Find this brochure and all our patient resources here: <http://library.nshealth.ca/PatientGuides>
 Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.
 For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

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Nova Scotia Health Authority
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If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider. The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.