



Questions & Answers about

CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING

I DON'T UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PAPER TESTS AND HPV TESTS. DON'T THEY LOOK FOR THE SAME THINGS?

With a Pap test, a clinician uses a small brush to get a sample of cells from your cervix (the cervix is the opening to the uterus or womb). The cells are looked at very closely under a microscope to see if any abnormal changes are present.

A Pap test is not the same as a pelvic exam. During the pelvic exam, the health care provider looks at and feels the organs around your cervix to make sure their shape and size is normal. A Pap test is usually part of a pelvic exam. If you're not sure whether your pelvic exam includes a Pap test, ask your doctor or nurse.

Unlike Pap tests, which are designed to look only for precancerous cervical cell changes, an HPV test can detect "high-risk" types of the human papillomavirus. HPV tests can be done along with a Pap test (sometimes the same sample that's taken with the Pap test is used). This can be enormously helpful to health care providers in determining which women are at greatest risk for cervical cancer, and the type of follow up care they need.

IS IT TRUE THAT HPV TESTS ARE RECOMMENDED FOR WOMEN 30 AND OLDER BUT NOT RECOMMENDED FOR YOUNGER WOMEN AND GIRLS? WHAT DOES AGE HAVE TO DO WITH WHETHER OR NOT YOU SHOULD BE TESTED?

HPV is common in young women, but is seldom dangerous and the virus is typically cleared fairly quickly by the immune system. For women under age 30, an HPV test usually isn't very helpful (unless her Pap test is unclear). For women age 30 and over, though, an HPV test can be very helpful. HPV infections in women of this age group are less likely to clear on their own, putting them at higher risk for cervical cancer.

An HPV test is used to check for "high-risk" HPV in two specific cervical cancer screening situations:



- As a follow-up test to determine which women over age 20 with unclear Pap test results might benefit from a quicker referral to other diagnostic procedures (such as colposcopy) and potential treatment of cervical changes that may be present.
- As a cervical cancer test in combination with a Pap test for women age 30 or over. Research shows that screening using both HPV and Pap tests is more likely to find abnormal cell changes than either test alone with women of this age.

I HEARD THAT THERE IS A NEW HPV TEST THAT CAN TELL WHETHER OR NOT YOU HAVE THE HPV TYPE THAT CAUSES CERVICAL CANCER. SHOULD I ASK MY HEALTH CARE PROVIDER FOR AN HPV TYPING TEST AT MY NEXT GYNECOLOGICAL EXAM?

The Cervista™ HPV 16/18 test was approved by the FDA in 2009. This test checks for HPV types 16 and/or 18, which together are responsible for approximately 70% of cervical cancers. This test is approved for use (in combination with a Pap test and Cervista™ HR test) as primary cervical cancer screening with women age 30 and older) and to determine if HPV16/18 are present with ASC-US Pap results.

The ability to determine if a woman has HPV 16/18 specifically is a new wrinkle in cervical cancer screening; previously, such tests were confined to medical research studies. The potential advantage to genotyping may be in allowing women age 30 and older who are high-risk HPV positive – but negative for the more aggressive HPV 16/18 types – to avoid immediate referral to colposcopy in favor of repeating Pap and HPV tests in 12 months.



WHY DO GUIDELINES NOW RECOMMEND YOUNG WOMEN WAIT UNTIL AGE 21 TO HAVE THEIR FIRST PAP TEST? IS THAT SAFE?

Experts traditionally called for Pap testing to begin within three years after first intercourse. Given that many girls become sexually active by the time they're in high school, many were beginning Pap tests as teenagers. Cervical cancer usually develops slowly, though, taking many years (often decades) to develop in many cases. HPV, and cell changes related to the virus, usually clear naturally in young women in their teens and 20's. Since HPV is rarely a threat to their health, there is concern Pap testing women in this age range may lead to needless diagnostic procedures (such as biopsies) and treatment (such as LEEP) that can do harm to the cervix.

Rates of STDs and unintended pregnancy are high for teens, however, so young women, parents, and health care providers should still be thinking about sexual health apart from Pap tests and cervical cancer. Adolescent girls and young women should be vaccinated against HPV, and it's recommended that all sexually active women under age 26 be tested yearly for chlamydia.

SHOULD I HAVE MY TEEN-AGE DAUGHTER TESTED FOR THE HPV VIRUS BEFORE SHE RECEIVES THE HPV VACCINE?

Getting your adolescents vaccinated against HPV now is an excellent idea. However, HPV testing isn't helpful or recommended for preventing cervical diseases in girls this young, and knowing one's HPV status at any age is not necessary before receiving an HPV vaccine. Girls who have HPV and receive the vaccine are still likely to benefit by being protected against other HPV types to which they may not have been exposed.

CAN AN HPV TEST HOW LONG I MIGHT HAVE HAD THE VIRUS, OR IF I CAN GIVE IT TO A NEW PARTNER?

No. HPV tests are valuable in screening for cervical cancer, but can't tell you how long you may have had the virus or if you are able to transmit HPV to a new partner. The newer test can tell you which "high-risk" type you may have contracted. Fortunately, most HPV infections are cleared naturally by the body in a few months and are not dangerous. Regular screening is important, though, for those cases where HPV doesn't go away on its own.

IF HPV IS THE KNOWN CAUSE OF CERVICAL CANCER IT MAKES SENSE THAT ALL WOMEN SHOULD HAVE AN HPV TEST. RIGHT?

The key is for women to have regular screening for cervical cancer, regardless of whether her health care provider uses a Pap test alone or in combination with an HPV test.

While regular Pap testing alone certainly remains a viable means of screening a woman for cervical cancer, the Pap/HPV test combo is a tool that can be very helpful to health care providers in figuring out which women are at greatest risk for the disease. Not all women need this type of test: for example, routine HPV testing isn't recommended for women under 30, as the rate of HPV infection is fairly high and the rate of cervical cancer is low. Most of these women will clear HPV naturally, putting them at little risk for developing cervical pre-cancer or cancer. HPV tests are typically used with younger women only when Pap test results are unclear.

HPV testing for women over 30 makes sense because they are more likely to have HPV infections that don't resolve quickly (due to aging immune system), therefore increasing their risk for cervical cancer. In women over 30, an HPV test can be of enormous value in helping her health care provider determine the type of follow-up care that best suits her needs.

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