

# Pap



## Does this test have other names?

Pap smear, cervical cytology, Papanicolaou test, Pap smear test, vaginal smear technique

## What is this test?

This test checks the cells from inside a woman's cervix for any changes that could lead to cancer. The cervix is the lower part of a woman's uterus that opens into the vagina.

This test is named after Georgios Papanicolaou, M.D., one of the healthcare providers who developed this method of testing for cervical cancer.

## Why do I need this test?

You may need this test as a screening test to look for cervical cancer or changes in cervical cells that might eventually lead to cancer. Major medical groups generally advise that women get regular Pap tests every 3 years starting at age 21. Getting a regular Pap test can be lifesaving. Cervical cancer is a serious type of cancer in women. It is also one of the most treatable types when found early.

If your test shows abnormal cells, your healthcare provider may be able to find and treat cervical problems right away or stop cervical cancer before it becomes life-threatening. Pap tests can also diagnose serious infections and pelvic inflammation.

## What other tests might I have along with this test?

You will likely have a pelvic exam along with this test. Depending on your age and other factors, your tissue samples may also be tested for human papillomavirus (HPV) infection at the same time your Pap test is done. Infection with some types of HPV puts you at risk for cervical cancer.

If you have an abnormal Pap test result, you may need other tests. These may include:

- **Colposcopy.** Your cervix and vagina are looked at with a microscope called a colposcope, which magnifies any abnormal areas.
- **Endocervical curettage.** Cells are taken from the opening of your cervix with a spoon-shaped tool and looked at under a microscope. This may be done during the colposcopy.
- **Biopsy.** A small tissue sample is taken from your cervix and looked at under a microscope. This may be done during the colposcopy.

## What do my test results mean?

Test results may vary depending on your age, gender, health history, and other things. Your test results may be different depending on the lab used. They may not mean you have a problem. Ask your healthcare provider what your test results mean for you.

Your results will either be normal, unclear, or abnormal. If you get an unclear or abnormal result, this does not mean that you have cancer. It can often mean a minor cervical problem. Your healthcare provider may do another Pap test to confirm the initial results. Or they may advise other tests, such as colposcopy.

Occasionally a lab test has a false-positive result. This means you do not have a cervical problem even though the test result shows you do.

## How is this test done?

This test is often done with a pelvic exam. You will lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet in stirrups, then relax and spread your legs. Your healthcare provider first checks your vagina and reproductive organs for infections and health problems.

Then your provider uses a device called a speculum to open the vagina. The provider examines your cervix and scrapes off a few cells from inside your cervix.

Some women may have slight discomfort or pressure when the speculum is inserted or when the sample of cells is taken.

## Does this test pose any risks?

This test poses no known risks.

## What might affect my test results?

Using vaginal lubricants, cleansers, contraceptives, or creams may mask your symptoms. Don't use vaginal douches and don't have sex for 2 days before an exam. Using these products or having sex may wash away or disguise abnormal cervical cells.

## How do I get ready for this test?

It may seem like a good idea to wash up before having a Pap test, but this can actually erase the signs of a health problem. For accurate test results, don't have sex or use tampons, douches, vaginal creams, deodorant sprays and powders, and contraceptive foams and jellies for 2 days before your exam.

Although you can have the test while you're menstruating, it is better to have the test when you're not. The ideal time to have a Pap test is at least 5 days after the end of your period.

Be sure your healthcare provider knows about all medicines, herbs, vitamins, and supplements you are taking. This includes medicines that don't need a prescription and any illegal drugs you may use.

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