



Cervical Cancer Screening

What is cervical cancer screening?

Screening tests look for **cancer cells in the cervix**. The cervix is the bottom part of the uterus, where it meets the vagina. Screening tests also look for cells that could turn into cancer, called "**precancer**." They can find cervical cancer and precancer in the early stages, when it can be treated or even cured.

What tests are used to screen for cervical cancer?

There are a few different ways to screen:

- **Pap test** – This is sometimes called a "Pap smear." It involves taking cells from the surface of the cervix and sending them to a lab. Then, an expert will check the cells under a microscope.
- **HPV test** – HPV stands for "human papillomavirus." Some types of this virus can cause cervical cancer. An HPV test involves testing cells from the cervix for certain types of HPV.
- **Combination test** – This means doing a Pap and HPV test at the same time.

What happens during a Pap or HPV test?

For both types of tests, your doctor will take cells from the **surface of your cervix**. To do this, they will gently insert a device called a "**speculum**" into your vagina. The device helps to push apart the walls of your vagina so that the doctor can see the cervix. Then, they will use a small tool to lightly **scrape cells** from the surface of your cervix. The tool looks like a small spatula or brush. This might be a little uncomfortable, but usually does not hurt.

When should I start being screened?

Most experts recommend that you start having Pap tests when you **turn 21**. Some experts recommend HPV tests instead of Pap tests, starting at **age 25**. But this option might not be available in many places. Your doctor can talk to you about your options.

What should I do to prepare for a Pap/HPV test?

You do not need to do anything special to prepare. People sometimes hear that they should not have sex or put anything in their vagina for 2 days before a Pap test, but this is not necessary.

How often should I be screened?

That depends on how old you are and the results of your past tests.

- If you are aged **21 to 29**, you should have a Pap test **every 3 years**. Or, if your doctor recommends HPV testing instead, you should have a test every **5 years beginning at age 25**.
- If you are **30 or older**, you can have a Pap test **every 3 years**. The other options are having an HPV test every 5 years or a combination Pap and HPV test every 5 years.
- If you are age **65 or older**, you can stop having Pap tests if you:
 - Had Pap tests done **regularly until age 65**.
 - Had **3 normal Pap tests** in a row, or 2 normal combination Pap and HPV tests over the past 10 years
 - Do **not** have other medical conditions that could weaken your immune system.

What if I have an abnormal Pap test result?

Abnormal Pap tests are common, and most people with an abnormal Pap test do not have cancer. If your Pap test has cells that look abnormal, your doctor can do more tests to figure out what is causing this. They will decide what to do based on your age, what your Pap test shows, and the results of any other tests you had. Follow-up tests might include:

- **HPV test** – If you haven't already had an HPV test, your doctor might order one. They might be able to do this on the cells already taken during your Pap test.
- **Another Pap test in 12 months** – Sometimes, if you wait a year and have another Pap test, you could find that the abnormal cells are back to normal. You might also have an HPV test at the same time.
- **Colposcopy** – For this test, the doctor will use a speculum to look at your cervix, just like during a Pap test. But they will look more closely using a device that looks like a microscope. It allows the doctor to see the cervix in more detail. During this test, the doctor might also take tiny samples of tissue from the cervix. This is called a "biopsy." The tissue samples are checked in a lab.