



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTER

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Understanding the Pap Smear

What is the Pap smear?

The Pap smear is a screening test to detect abnormal cells or cancer on the surface of the cervix (the lower end of the uterus which extends into the vagina). A Pap smear is collected as part of a woman's yearly gynecological examination. Properly and regularly performed, it can detect abnormal cervical cells **before** they become cancerous. Abnormalities which are detected early can be treated easily and effectively. Since the development of the Pap smear the incidence of cervical cancer has decreased by 70%!

A yearly Pap smear is a very important tool available to you for early detection and prevention of cervical cancer.

Who is at risk for cervical cancer?

A woman's risk for cervical cancer is directly related to her total lifetime number of sexual partners. The greater the total number of sexual partners, the greater the risk. There is strong evidence that infection of the cervix with the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), the sexually transmitted virus which can cause genital warts, is associated with abnormalities of the cervical cells. Often times, if not treated, these changes can progress to cancer of the cervix. Even one lifetime sexual partner, if that person carries HPV, can put a woman at risk for cervical cancer.

Women who are at increased risk have one or more of the following characteristics:

- * More than one sexual partner
- * Became sexually active before age 20
- * Their partner has had more than one sexual partner
- * Exposure to a sexual partner whose previous sexual partner had precancerous cell abnormalities of the cervix or had cervical cancer
- * A history of HPV, genital warts, or other Sexually Transmitted Infections

- * Smokes
- * DES daughters (DES is a synthetic hormone given to women to prevent miscarriage between the years 1940 and 1971)
- * First pregnancy before age 18 or many pregnancies

How is a Pap smear collected?

During a pelvic exam, a speculum is inserted into the vagina to separate the vaginal walls and visualize the cervix. Cells are taken from the cervix using a small, flat spatula which is rubbed on the surface of the cervix and a small, soft brush which is rubbed in the opening of the cervical canal. The cells are then put into a special liquid media..

Who evaluates a Pap smear?

The specimen is sent to a laboratory. A specially trained cytotechnologist examines the cells under a microscope looking for abnormal cells. The cytotechnologist's findings may be reviewed by a medical doctor specializing in pathology (pathologist).

How is a Pap smear evaluated?

The system for evaluation of Pap smears was standardized in 1988 and is called the Bethesda System. It provides three categories of information:

1. A statement of the adequacy of the specimen.

The laboratory first evaluates the specimen to see if it contains all of the required cell types from the cervix. The normal cell types found on the surface of the cervix are squamous and columnar epithelium. If the required cell types are not present, the smear will be labeled inadequate, and another Pap smear sample will need to be taken. This is not an abnormality.

2. General categorization

The smear is labeled as "normal" or "other."

3. Descriptive diagnosis

If the smear is labeled as "other", this section provides more information about what was observed on the smear. This includes a description of any type of abnormality which has been identified. The abnormalities can range from inflammation, specific types of infection (yeast for example), atypical cells of undetermined significance (also called ASCUS) to precancerous (also called dysplasia) and cancerous changes in the cells.

How can I improve the accuracy of my Pap test?

1. Do not put anything into your vagina for 2-3 days prior to your exam. This means no douching, vaginal antifungals, or contraceptive products inserted in the vagina.
2. Abstain from intercourse for 2 days prior to your Pap smear.
3. A Pap smear should not be performed while you have your period. (Midcycle is the best time)
4. If you are having symptoms of a vaginal infection, it may not be the best time for a Pap smear. Schedule an appointment to see your healthcare provider to take care of the infection first.

Obtain your Pap smear on a regular basis decided with your healthcare provider according to your risk. You increase your chances of detecting an abnormality early if you are consistent about getting your Pap smears every year.

To schedule a Pap smear at the Health Center call Women's Health at (301) 314-8190.

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