

For more information on HPV, Pap tests or cervical cancer, log on to www.papscreen.org.au or call 13 11 20.

HPV testing

A guide for women with high-grade abnormal Pap tests.



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It is not uncommon for abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix to be found when you have a Pap test. In most cases, these changes are caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV) and are usually no cause for alarm.

WHAT IS HPV?

HPV is so common that it could be considered a normal part of being sexually active. Four out of five women have HPV at some time in their lives and because there are often no symptoms, many will never know it. The body's immune system usually clears the virus in around one to two years.

There are over 100 types of HPV affecting various parts of the body. Over 40 types affect the genital area but just a few of these affect the cervix.

Genital HPV is spread through genital skin contact during sexual activity.

How do I know if I have HPV?

Most people will have genital HPV at some time in their life and never know it. Some women only become aware that they have HPV if they have an abnormal Pap test result or if genital warts appear.

A Pap test checks for changes to the cells of the cervix. These cell changes are most likely caused by HPV and usually return to normal when the body has cleared the virus. If the changes continue they can be easily treated before they become more serious.



What does it mean if I have genital HPV?

After entering the body, HPV will either remain dormant (inactive) inside the body's cells, or become active. When active, HPV can cause changes to the cells of the cervix.

HPV types affecting the cervix are called either low-risk or high-risk. Low-risk types can cause minor changes to the cells of the cervix or genital warts, but they do not lead to cancer. Low-risk types usually clear naturally from the body within one to two years.

Some high-risk types of HPV can take longer to clear from the body. In a small proportion of women, infection with these types persists; that is, it is not cleared from the body. This can then lead to significant cell changes. These changes can be detected on a Pap test and easily treated in the majority of cases. But if these cell changes are left undetected and untreated you run a greater risk of developing cancer.

TREATMENT

There is no treatment for HPV. The body's immune system usually clears the virus naturally in around one to two years. If the virus takes longer to clear from the body and causes changes to the cells of the cervix, these changes can be treated.

Some types of HPV can also cause genital warts. If you have visible warts, your doctor can suggest suitable treatment for you.



HPV AND CERVICAL CANCER

Most women with genital HPV will not develop cervical cancer (as the virus usually clears by itself). However, when cervical cancer occurs, HPV is found in almost all cases.

Some high-risk types of HPV, including types 16 and 18, are difficult for the body to clear naturally. Long-term infection with these high-risk types can increase a woman's risk of developing cervical cancer.

HPV TESTING

The purpose of an HPV test is to find out if a woman is infected with high-risk HPV types associated with cervical cancer. Because HPV infection is so common in the first 10 years of having sex, and because it usually clears from the body, having an HPV test if you are under the age of 30 is usually not helpful.

An HPV test cannot tell the exact type of high-risk HPV the person has.

RECOMMENDED USE FOR HPV TESTING

HPV tests are only recommended for women who have had treatment for a high-grade abnormality. In these cases, the test is used to determine when these women can return to having two-yearly Pap tests.

Studies show that women who have treatment to remove a high-grade abnormality – about 15,000 women each year in Australia – are at a slightly higher risk of cervical cancer than women who have never had an abnormality.

In the past, because of this higher risk, these women were told to have annual Pap tests for the rest of their lives – not very popular with most women!

Now, women who have received treatment for a high-grade abnormality will have three internal examinations over a 24-month period. This will involve:

1 4 to 6 months after treatment → Pap test and colposcopy

2 12 months after treatment → Pap test and HPV test

3 24 months after treatment → Pap test and HPV test

= If the final two Pap tests and two HPV tests are normal, women can return to two-yearly screening.

WHAT DO THESE TESTS MEAN?

The Pap test and colposcopy will monitor any changes in the cells of the cervix and ensure they have returned to normal.

A colposcopy is a closer examination of the cervix using a special microscope called a colposcope. The colposcope itself does not enter the body. The whole examination usually takes 10 to 15 minutes and most women do not experience any pain.

The HPV test will determine whether or not a high-risk HPV type is present.

If at the 12 or 24 month interval either the Pap test or HPV test is abnormal, then these tests will need to be repeated annually until both are normal on two consecutive occasions.

COMMON QUESTIONS

How is the HPV test taken?

The HPV test is conducted in much the same way as a Pap test. A small spatula or soft brush is used to take a sample of cells from the cervix, which will be examined. The results usually come back to your doctor or nurse within a week or two.

How much does the HPV test cost?

The HPV test is free for women who have had treatment for a high-grade abnormality and are having the test to determine if they can return to two-yearly screening. For all other women, the test costs about \$80.

Can I be re-infected with HPV?

Once you have been exposed to a particular type of HPV, you are unlikely to catch it again, as the body usually becomes immune to that type. However, you are still at risk of other HPV types.

Does having HPV mean my partner has been unfaithful?

Finding out that you or your partner has HPV does not necessarily mean that either of you has been unfaithful. The nature of HPV means that someone can have HPV for a long time without ever knowing it. It may very well be the result of sexual activity from many years ago.



Do I need to tell my partner if I have HPV?

If you have genital warts, you may choose to discuss this with your partner because he/she is at risk of developing them as well. Discussion with a partner about Pap test results linked to HPV infection is an individual's decision.

If you are worried about passing HPV on to your partner, talk to your doctor or nurse, or go to a sexual health centre for further advice.

Should I have the cervical cancer vaccine?

A vaccine that protects against two types of HPV that cause about 70% of cervical cancers is now available.

It works best if given before exposure to HPV, that is, before the start of sexual activity. For all women who have had sex, (especially those who have had a high grade abnormality) Pap tests are the best protection against cervical cancer.

Will treatment for a high-grade abnormality affect my chances of becoming pregnant?

Having treatment for abnormal cells on the cervix will not affect your ability to have children. However, it is wise to have any abnormality checked and treated before pregnancy. Some types of treatment, such as a cone biopsy, may weaken the cervix. While it is still possible to become pregnant, a stitch may need to be inserted into the cervix to strengthen it and reduce the risk of miscarriage.

You may still have questions about HPV testing and treatment of your high-grade abnormality. Speak with your doctor, or call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.