

When Should You Get a Pap Test and Why?



A Pap test can find changes in the cells of the cervix.

A Pap test—often called a Pap smear—is a quick test done during an office visit. It can help find early changes in cervical cells and prevent cervical cancer. Your doctor or health care professional gently removes cells from your cervix (the part of the uterus or womb at the top of the vagina) during a pelvic exam. The cells are sent to a lab to see if they might turn into cervical cancer.

Most Pap tests are negative. This means that the cells are normal and healthy. If there are changes in the cells on your cervix, you may need further testing to find out if you have changes that might lead to cancer (precancerous).

Why is it important to get a Pap test?

A Pap test can find changes in the cells of the cervix. These changes can usually be treated with simple office procedures. Because of the Pap test, many fewer women now die from cervical cancer.

How does a woman get cervical cancer?

Scientists think that certain types of the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) cause cervical cancer. HPV is a common virus that can be passed from one partner to another during sex. Most people carry HPV, briefly, multiple times in their lives, but the immune system clears the virus without any negative effects. There are many types of HPV, and most of them are harmless. A few types of HPV are linked with cervical precancer and cancer. Other types of HPV cause genital warts, though most people with HPV have no visible signs or symptoms.

Smoking may increase your chance of developing cervical cancer, especially if you have HPV. If you are a smoker and would like to quit, we can help. Talk to your doctor or health care professional, visit kp.org/quitsmoking, or go to your Health Education Department for more information.

How can I protect myself from cervical cancer?

The best way to protect yourself from cervical cancer is to get regular Pap tests. Changes in the cells of the cervix are present for years in most women who eventually develop cervical cancer. Cervical cancer can be prevented if cell changes are found and treated early, before cervical cancer develops.

HPV can be spread during sex and through skin-to-skin contact. Genital HPV cannot be prevented by using condoms. Using condoms is still important because it helps prevent other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

If you are hurt or threatened by a partner or spouse, including pressuring or forcing you to have sex, or refusing to wear a condom to protect against pregnancy or STDs, this can seriously affect your health.

Should I see my doctor?

Women should go to their doctor or health care professional if there are any visible signs of genital warts.

Women should go to their doctor or health care professional if there are any visible signs of genital warts, such as unusual bumps or skin changes on or near the vagina, vulva, anus, or groin (where the genital area meets the inner thigh). You should also see your doctor if you have any unusual itching, pain, or bleeding. Men should go to their doctor or health care professional if there are any unusual bumps or skin changes on the penis, scrotum, or groin.

HPV Vaccine

We recommend that girls get the HPV vaccine at their pre-teen check up when they are 11 to 12 years old (preferably before they are sexually active). The vaccine can prevent the types of HPV linked to harmful changes in the cervix as well as those that cause genital warts. Young women age 19 to 26 should talk with their doctor to see if the vaccine might be right for them. Vaccination of women older than 18 is much less likely to prevent precancerous changes than if the vaccine is given before the start of sexual activity. The vaccine is not approved for women over age 26.

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Who should get a Pap test?

You should get a Pap test every three years if any one of the following applies:

- You have been sexually active for three years or more
- You are over 21 years old

You should discuss how often to have a Pap test with your doctor if:

- You have had an abnormal Pap test
- You have had cancer of the cervix, vulva, or vagina

How often should I get a Pap test?

Women under 30

Kaiser Permanente recommends that women under the age of 30 get a Pap test every three years (after having had two normal yearly Pap tests in a row). Cervical cells become cancerous very slowly. A Pap test every three years can find changes in cells early on, which can usually be treated during an office procedure before they progress to cancer. This recommendation reflects the fact that almost all women who get cervical cancer are age 30 or older. HPV testing is not routinely done under the age of 30 because positive tests are so common that they don't mean very much.

Women 30 and older

At age 30 and over, the risk of cervical cancer is greater and the chance of having a positive HPV test

is lower, so you should have a Pap test plus an HPV test. If both tests are negative, your risk of cervical cancer is extremely low. You should follow up with regular Pap plus HPV tests every three years. This does not mean you can't see your doctor more often, it just means that you do not need testing for cervical cancer more often. If your HPV test is positive, you need to have a Pap plus HPV test every year until your HPV becomes negative.

You should also get a Pap test if:

- You are a new member.
- You have recently returned to Kaiser Permanente, and have not had a Pap test at Kaiser Permanente in the past three years.
- You have never had a Pap test.

If you had a Pap test that was not normal, you and your doctor will decide how often you need to get tested.

If you have bleeding between periods, pain in your lower abdomen, or other symptoms, see your doctor or health care professional right away.

When can I stop having Pap tests?

You can stop having Pap tests if:

- You are over 65 and have had at least 3 normal Pap tests in the past 10 years; or
- You are over 65 and have had a negative HPV test and a normal Pap test; or

- You have had a total hysterectomy (where your cervix was removed) and you have no history of cancer of the cervix, vulva, or vagina

If you had a partial hysterectomy (only your uterus was removed) and you still have your cervix, you may stop having Pap tests under the same circumstances as women who have not had a hysterectomy.

Do I need a Pap test if I do not have sexual intercourse?

It is recommended that all women who are between the ages of 21 and 65 (and have not had a total hysterectomy) have Pap tests. This is because HPV is present in people's mouths and under their fingernails and can occasionally be transmitted by intimate contact other than sexual intercourse.

Additional resources

- Connect to your physician or nurse practitioner's home page at kp.org/my doctor or go to kp.org to access more health and drug information, interactive programs, health classes, and more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- If you are hit, hurt, or threatened by a partner or spouse, this can seriously affect your health. There is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to ndvh.org.
- Contact your facility's Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.