

What is a Pap smear?

A Pap smear is a test for cancer. A sample of cells from the cervix (opening to the uterus or womb) is placed on a slide. The cells are then checked for signs of cancer. Your doctor is able to get the sample of cells by rubbing the cervix with a small spatula or brush. The cells that rub off are then placed on a slide. The Pap smear can test only for cancer of the cervix. In the United States cancer of the cervix is the sixth most common cancer in women. More than 14,000 women get cervical cancer each year. If it is found early and treated, it can be cured. The Pap smear is the only way to find cancer of the cervix in its early stages.

Should I get a Pap smear?

If you are 18 years of age or older you should have a Pap smear once each year. If you are sexually active at any age, you should have a Pap smear once each year. If three Pap smears in a row are normal, you should talk with your doctor about whether the Pap smears can be spaced farther apart.

What things increase my risk of getting cervical cancer?

- Smoking
- Previous abnormal pap smear
- History of sexually transmitted disease, including the wart virus
- Having sex at an early age
- More than two lifetime sexual partners

What if my Pap smear is abnormal?

An abnormal Pap smear does not always mean cancer of the cervix. Many things can cause cells to look abnormal. Some things that cause cells to look abnormal can be treated. Menopause, infection, and irritation are some things that can cause cell changes. Other abnormalities can be pre-cancerous and are known as dysplasia (dis play' zha).

If your Pap smear shows any of these changes, your doctor may want to repeat the test sooner than usual. Your doctor may also want to treat you with medicine. In some cases, your doctor will use a special microscope to magnify the abnormal area for a closer look. This procedure is called colposcopy (col pos' co pee).

Samples of tissue from a specific area can be taken during a colposcopy. This is called a biopsy. The biopsy tissue is then checked for abnormal cells.

If cancer cells are seen on your Pap smear or biopsy, you will be treated by your doctor or a cancer specialist. If your Pap smear is abnormal in any way, talk with your doctor about what treatment is right for you.

Remember...

If you have been sexually active or are 18 years of age or older, talk with your doctor about having a Pap smear. It is an important screening test for your good health.