

When Should You Get a Pap Test and Why?

for women



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A Pap test—often called a Pap smear—is a quick test done during an office visit. It can help find early signs of 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 are cancerous or 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 most kinds of cervical cancer. HPV is a common virus that can be passed from one partner to another during sex. There are many types of HPV, and most of them are harmless. A few types of HPV are linked with cervical 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 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 completely prevented by using condoms. However, we recommend using condoms in order to lower the risk. Using condoms also helps prevent other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

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.

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HPV vaccine is available for girls between the ages of 11 and 18 (or 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. The vaccine is not approved for women over age 26.

Who should get a Pap test?

You should get a Pap test every 1 to 3 years if any one of the following applies:

- You have been sexually active for 3 years or more.
- You are over 21 years old.
- You have had an abnormal Pap test.
- You have had cancer of the cervix, vulva, or vagina.
- You have had genital warts.

How often should you get a Pap test?

Women Under 30

Kaiser Permanente recommends that women under the age of 30 get a Pap test every 1 to 3 years (after having had 2 normal yearly Pap tests in a row). Cervical cells become cancerous very slowly. A Pap test every 1 to 3 years can find changes in cells early on, which can usually be treated during an office procedure before the cancer can spread.

Women 30 and Over

At age 30 and over, you should have Pap plus HPV testing. If both tests are negative, your risk of cervical cancer is extremely low. You should follow up with regular Pap plus HPV tests every 3 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 any one of the following applies:

- 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 3 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 a Pap test.

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

You may be wondering . . .

Do I need to get 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.

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
- If 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 should continue to have Pap tests.

Additional resources

- Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- With a *Kaiser Permanente Healthphone Directory*, you can pick messages to hear on Kaiser Permanente Health-phone (1-800-332-7563; TTY: 1-800-777-9059). Request a *Directory* from your Health Education Center or Department or download a copy at members.kp.org. (Search "Healthphone".)