

Cervical cancer screening with the HPV test and the Pap test in women ages 30 and older

When to get tested and how to make sense
of your test results



If you are 30 years or older and

- your Pap test is normal
- your HPV test is negative

**you can wait 5 years before being tested
again for cervical cancer!**

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
Division of Cancer Prevention and Control





If you have had a Pap test and HPV test, this booklet will answer your questions about:

- Cervical cancer..... 1
- Human papillomavirus (HPV)..... 2
- Cervical cancer screening tests 3–5
- What your Pap test result means 6
- What your HPV test result means 7
- What your Pap and HPV test results mean together 8–9
- How to prevent cervical cancer..... 10–12
- Common questions about HPV..... 13
- How to talk to your partner about your test results 14–15
- Resources 16–17
- **Glossary of bolded words** **18–19**
- Know the facts..... 20
- Questions to ask your doctor 21

Getting abnormal results does not mean that you have cervical cancer now. For specific questions about your test results, talk to your doctor.

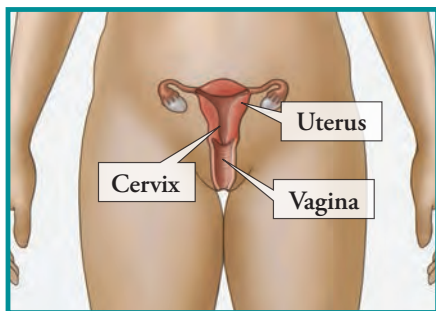
Cervical Cancer

What is the cervix?

The **cervix** is the opening of your **uterus** (womb). It is part of a woman's reproductive system.

What is cervical cancer?

Cancer can grow on your cervix—the same way it can grow on other body parts. Most times, cervical cancer grows slowly. It can take 10 to 15 years (or more) for abnormal **cells** to turn into cancer.



The cervix is the opening of your uterus (womb). It is part of a woman's reproductive system.

Cervical cancer often does not cause symptoms until it is advanced. Women with advanced cervical cancer may have abnormal bleeding, discharge, or pain.

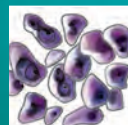
What causes cervical cancer?

A **virus**, called **human papillomavirus** (pap-ah-LO-mah-VYE-rus)—also just called **HPV**—can cause normal cells on your cervix to turn abnormal. Over many years, abnormal cells can turn into cancer if they are not found and treated by your doctor. You cannot see or feel HPV or these cell changes on your cervix.

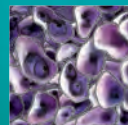
HPV can cause changes in cervical cells over time



Normal cells



Precancer cells



Cancer cells

Abnormal cells are sometimes called “precancer” because they are not normal, but they are not yet cancer.



IMPORTANT: *Cervical cancer is not hereditary like other cancers.*

Every year in the United States, about 12,000 women get cervical cancer and almost 4,000 women die from it. But it is the most preventable female cancer with regular screening tests and early treatment.

See the glossary on pages 18–19 for definitions of bolded words.



HPV Basics

What is HPV?

HPV is a virus that is very common. It can infect the **genital** areas of both men and women. It usually has no signs or symptoms and goes away on its own.

What can HPV do to my body?

HPV can infect the genital areas in different ways:

- Some HPV types can cause changes on a woman's cervix that can lead to cervical cancer over time.
- Other HPV types can cause changes that lead to genital warts in men and women.* But the HPV types that can cause genital warts are different from the types that can cause cervical cancer.

Most of the time, HPV goes away by itself within 2 years and does not cause health problems. It is thought that the immune system fights off HPV naturally. Experts do not know why HPV goes away in most, but not all cases. It is only when HPV remains in the cervical cells for many years that it can cause cervical cancer.

How could I get HPV?

HPV is passed on through genital or skin-to-skin contact, most often during vaginal or anal sex. Most people never even know they have HPV. So it may not be possible to know who gave you HPV or when you got it. HPV is so common that most people get it soon after they start having sex. And it may only be found years later.

Therefore, all women who ever had sex are at risk for cervical cancer.

HPV is not the same as HIV (the AIDS virus) or herpes. Both of these viruses can be passed on during sex, but they do not cause the same symptoms or health problems.

*For information about genital warts, see www.cdc.gov/hpv.

Cervical Cancer Screening Tests

How can I prevent cervical cancer?

You can **prevent** cervical cancer with regular screening tests, like the Pap test and the HPV DNA test (HPV test). The **Pap test** is a **screening test** for cervical cancer. It looks for abnormal cells on your cervix that could turn into cancer over time. That way, problems can be found and treated before they ever turn into cancer. All women should start getting regular Pap tests at age 21.

An **HPV test** looks for the virus that can cause abnormal cells on your cervix. For women ages 30 and older, the HPV test can be used along with the Pap test. This is called HPV co-testing. Screening tests can find early problems before they become cancer. That way, problems can be found and removed before they ever become cancer.



Cervical cancer often does not cause symptoms until it is advanced. So it is important to get screened even when you feel healthy.

You took the first step to prevent cervical cancer by getting a Pap test. If you're reading this booklet, you may also have received the HPV test with your Pap test. These tests are often done at the same time.

The Pap and HPV tests look for different things:

The Pap test

Checks your cervix for abnormal cells that could turn into cervical cancer.

The HPV test

Checks your cervix for the virus (HPV) that can cause abnormal cells and cervical cancer.

“HPV” stands for “human papillomavirus.”
For more definitions, see the glossary.



The Pap and HPV tests can find problems early that could lead to cervical cancer over time.

These tests do not:

- Check for early signs of other cancers.
- Check your **fertility**.
- Check for other sexually transmitted infections.
- Check for all HPV types. There are many types of HPV. Only HPV tests that check for HPV types linked to cervical cancer are recommended.

According to some expert organizations, screening for cervical cancer with both the HPV test and the Pap test is an option for women ages 30 and older.

Getting the HPV test with the Pap test at the same time can safely increase screening intervals up to 5 years for women who do not have HPV and have a normal Pap test result even if they have new sexual partners.



Even without the HPV test, women who have several normal Pap tests only need a Pap test every 3 years.

The HPV test will not tell you if you ever had HPV, but only if you have HPV now.



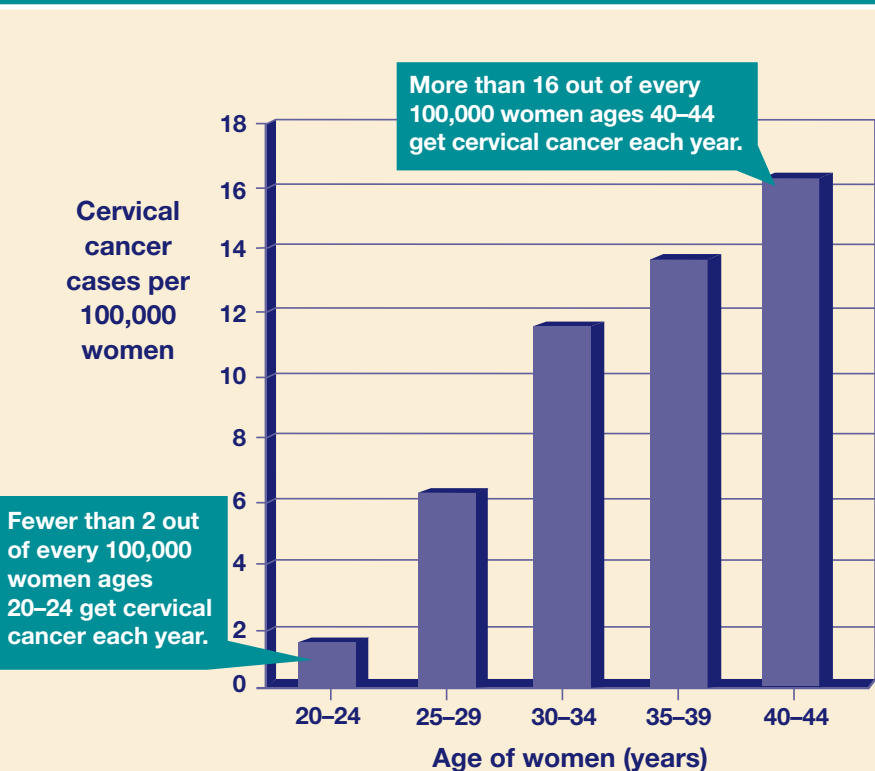
Why don't doctors recommend the HPV test as a screening test for younger women and teens?

HPV is very common in women younger than age 30. Since most HPV that is found in these women will never cause them health problems, it is not useful to test young women for HPV. Most young women will fight off HPV within a few years.

HPV is less common in women older than age 30. HPV also is more likely to signal a health problem for these women, who may have had the virus for many years because their bodies did not fight off HPV. Doctors may use the HPV test to tell if these women are at higher risk for cervical cancer and if they need to be screened more often.

Regular Pap tests (alone) are still good screening tests for cervical cancer—for any woman ages 21 and older.

In the United States, cervical cancer is rare in women in their 20s. It is much more common in women older than 30.



What Does My Pap Test Result Mean?

Your Pap test will come back as “normal,” “unclear,” or “abnormal.”

Normal



A normal (or “negative”) result means that no cell changes were found on your cervix. This is good news. But you still need to get Pap tests in the future. New cell changes can still form on your cervix.

Unclear



It is common for test results to come back unclear. Your doctor may use other words to describe this result, like **equivocal**, **inconclusive**, or **ASC-US**. These all mean the same thing—that your cervical cells look like they could be abnormal. It is not clear if it’s related to HPV. It could be related to life changes like pregnancy, menopause, or an infection. The HPV test can help find out if your cell changes are related to HPV.

Abnormal



An **abnormal** result means that cell changes were found on your cervix. This usually does not mean that you have cervical cancer.

Abnormal changes on your cervix are likely caused by HPV. The changes may be minor (low-grade) or serious (high-grade). Most of the time, minor changes go back to normal on their own. But more serious changes can turn into cancer if they are not removed. The more serious changes are often called “**precancer**” because they are not yet cancer, but they can turn into cancer over time.

In rare cases, an abnormal Pap test can show that you may have cancer. You will need other tests to be sure. The earlier you find cervical cancer, the easier it is to treat.

What Does My HPV Test Result Mean?

Your HPV test will come back as either “positive” or “negative.”

- A negative HPV test means you do not have an HPV type that is linked to cervical cancer.
- A positive HPV test means you do have an HPV type that may be linked to cervical cancer. This does not mean you have cervical cancer now. But it could be a warning.

HPV test results are meaningful only with your Pap test results. To understand what these tests mean together, see the following pages:

- If your HPV test is negative (normal), see page 8.
- If your HPV test is positive (abnormal), see page 9.



“I see my doctor regularly for a Pap test. This year, my doctor told me the test was abnormal. He also said I have HPV. I was confused. What does this mean?”

“HPV” stands for “human papillomavirus.”
For more definitions, see the glossary.



HPV and Pap Test Results

If your HPV test is negative (normal), and your...

Pap test is normal

This means

- You are very unlikely to have HPV in your cervix.
- Your cervical cells are normal.
- You have a very low chance of getting cervical cancer in the next few years.

You should

- Wait 5 years before being tested again.
- Ask your doctor when to come in for your next visit.

Pap test is unclear (ASC-US)

This means

- You do not have HPV, but your Pap test was unclear.
- Even if you do have cell changes, it is unlikely that they are caused by HPV.

You should

- Ask your doctor when to come in for your next visit.

Pap test is abnormal

This means

- Your Pap test found abnormal cells.
- Your HPV test did not find HPV.
- It's important to find out why the two tests are showing different things.

Your doctor may

- Take a closer look at your cervix (called a **colposcopy**) to find out if your cells are abnormal and/or treat you right away.

HPV and Pap Test Results

If your HPV test is positive (abnormal), and your...

Pap test is normal

This means

- Your cervical cells are normal, but you have HPV.
- You may fight off HPV naturally and never get cell changes. Or you may not fight off HPV, and HPV could cause cell changes in the future.
- Most women fight off HPV within 2 years. It is not known why most women fight off HPV and some do not.

You should

- Get another Pap and HPV test in 1 year. Cell changes happen slowly. Some time must pass before your doctor can tell if HPV will go away or cause cell changes.

Pap test is unclear (ASC-US)

This means

- You have HPV, but your Pap test was unclear.

Your doctor will

- Take a closer look at your cervix (called a colposcopy) to find out if your cells are abnormal.
- Your doctor may need to either remove the abnormal cells or monitor them to make sure they do not get worse.

Pap test is abnormal

This means

- You have HPV.
- Your cervical cells are abnormal.
- This does not usually mean you have cancer.

Your doctor will

- Take a closer look at your cervix to find out if your cells are abnormal and how serious the cell changes are.
- Your doctor may need to remove the abnormal cells to make sure they do not get worse.

How to Prevent Cervical Cancer

Did you know that if you have a normal Pap test and a negative HPV test, it is safe to wait 5 years until your next cervical cancer screening exam? Now, that's good news!

When to screen

Your results on the HPV test and Pap test will tell your doctor how long it is safe for you to wait before getting screened again.



Remember if you have a normal Pap test and a negative HPV test, it is safe to wait 5 years until your next cervical cancer screening exam.

If I have HPV, do I have cervical cancer?

No. HPV is not the same as cervical cancer. HPV is the virus that can cause cervical cancer. Many women have HPV. Few of them get cervical cancer if they follow their doctor's advice for more testing and/or treatment.

What will happen if I need to come back for more testing?

Your doctor will do what's right for you, based on your test results. Your doctor may

- Ask you to wait before re-testing with the Pap and/or HPV test. This is called “watchful waiting.” It is common.
- Take a closer look at your cervix. This is done using a special lens that makes your cervix look bigger (called a colposcopy).
- Take a small sample of your cervix (called a **biopsy**) to study it more carefully.
- Treat you. This involves destroying or taking out the abnormal cells. These treatments may be uncomfortable, but they can be done during one visit to your doctor.
- Refer you to a specialist. This might happen if your test results suggest that you may have cancer.

Why wait for more tests if I could have cancer?

It is possible that the cell changes you have will never turn into cancer. They may go back to normal without any treatment. And since treatment can have risks and side effects, it is best to make sure you really need treatment before getting it. Cervical changes happen very slowly. Some time must pass before your doctor can tell if these changes need to be treated. Be patient. But be sure to go back to your doctor when told—for all appointments and testing.



Remember: Many women get HPV. But few of them get cervical cancer—as long as they get the tests and treatments their doctor recommends. Most times, problems that are found can be treated before they ever turn into cervical cancer.

What else can I do to prevent cervical cancer?

- Keep your next doctor's appointment. Mark your calendar or post a note so you remember it.
- Go back for more testing or treatment if your doctor tells you to.
- Keep getting regular Pap tests—at least once every 3 years or every 5 years with the Pap and HPV tests.
- Do not smoke. Smoking harms all of your body's cells, including your cervical cells. If you smoke and have HPV, you have higher chances of getting cervical cancer. If you smoke, ask your doctor for help quitting.



“HPV” stands for “human papillomavirus.”
For more definitions, see the glossary.



Preventive Health Screenings

It is still important to see your doctor regularly for preventive health screenings, called well-woman visits, even if

- Your Pap and HPV DNA tests are normal and you will not get a Pap and HPV test each visit.
- You feel healthy.
- You are past your childbearing years.

Your well-woman visits are a chance for you to talk to your provider about

- Your menstrual cycle (period).
- Birth control.
- Sexuality.
- Infertility.
- Menopause (the change of life).
- Depression.
- Other health concerns.

Your doctor may also want to screen you for

- Breast cancer.
- Blood pressure.
- Other health problems.



Common Questions About HPV

Is there a treatment for HPV or abnormal cells?

There is no treatment for HPV (a virus). But there are treatments for abnormal cervical cells, which can be destroyed or removed. Treating abnormal cells will stop them from growing into cancer. No treatment is perfect. That's why it's important to go back to your doctor as told, to make sure abnormal cells do not grow back. You may need to get screening tests more often for a while. But most people do eventually fight off the virus.

Does having HPV or abnormal cervical cells affect my chances of getting pregnant or having healthy babies?

Having HPV or cell changes on your cervix does not make it harder to get or stay pregnant. The type of HPV that is linked to cancer should not affect the health of your future babies. But if you need treatment for your cell changes, the treatment could affect your chances of carrying a baby to term, in rare cases. If you need treatment, ask your doctor if the treatment can affect your ability to carry your baby to term.

Will I pass HPV to my current partner?

If you have been with your partner for a while, your partner likely has HPV too. But your partner likely has no signs or symptoms of HPV. There is no way to know if your partner gave you HPV, or if you gave HPV to your partner.

Can I prevent passing HPV to a new partner?

Condoms may lower your chances of passing HPV to your new partner, if used all the time and the right way. But HPV can infect areas that are not covered by a condom—so condoms may not fully protect against HPV. The only sure way to prevent passing HPV to a new partner is to not have sex.





How do I talk to my partner about HPV?

You and your partner may benefit from talking openly about HPV. You can tell your partner that

- HPV is very common. It can infect the genital areas of both men and women. It usually has no signs or symptoms and goes away on its own.
- There is no test yet for men to find out if they have HPV. But the most common health problem caused by HPV in men is genital warts. The type of HPV found on your HPV test can cause cervical cancer in women; it does not cause genital warts.
- Partners who have been together for a while tend to share HPV. This means that your partner likely has HPV already, even though your partner may have no signs or symptoms.

- Having HPV does not mean that you or your partner is having sex outside of your relationship. There is no sure way to know when you got HPV or who gave it to you. A person can have HPV for many years before it is found.

Most sexually active people get HPV at some time in their lives, though most will never know it. Even people with only one lifetime sex partner can get HPV, if their partner had it.

Getting the HPV and Pap tests at the same time can safely increase screening intervals up to 5 years for women who do not have HPV and have a normal Pap test result even if they have new sexual partners.



If your sex partner is female, you should talk to her about the link between HPV and cervical cancer, and encourage her to get screened for cervical cancer.

I heard about a new HPV vaccine. Can it help me?

The HPV vaccine protects against the HPV types that most often cause cervical cancer and is given in a series of 3 shots. The vaccine is recommended for girls 11 and 12 years of age. The vaccine also can be given to females ages 13–26 who did not get any or all of the shots yet. (Note: the vaccine can be given to girls 9 or 10 years of age.) The HPV vaccine is also recommended for boys and young men. To learn more, visit www.cdc.gov/hpv/vaccine.html.

If I've had a hysterectomy, do I still need to get screened for cervical cancer?

This depends on why you got your hysterectomy, and if you still have your cervix. If you got a total hysterectomy for reasons other than cancer, you may not need cervical cancer screening. Talk to your doctor to find out if you still need to get screened.



“HPV” stands for “human papillomavirus.”
For more definitions, see the glossary.



Resources

Free or Low-Cost Cervical Cancer Screening Tests

You may be able to get cervical cancer screening and **follow-up** tests for free or at low cost if you

- **Have health insurance.** If you have questions about coverage, talk to your insurance company.
- **Are eligible for Medicaid.** To learn more, call **1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)**. You can also find your nearest Medicaid office by visiting the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services at www.cms.hhs.gov/RegionalOffices.
- **Are age 65 or older.** Medicare pays for the Pap test every 2 years, or every year for some women. To learn more about Medicare's Pap test coverage, call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227). The call is free and you can speak to someone in English or Spanish.
- **Have a low income or do not have health insurance.**

To find out if you can get free or low-cost tests and where to go, call or visit

- **Your state or local health department**

To find your state health department, visit www.cdc.gov/mmwr/international/relres.html.

To find your local health department, visit www.healthguideusa.org/local_health_departments.htm.*

- **CDC's National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program**

To find local or state programs call 1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636) or visit www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp/screenings.htm.

- **Federally Qualified Health Centers**

To find a local clinic, go to <http://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov>.

* Linking to a non-federal site does not constitute an endorsement by HHS or any of its employees of the sponsors or the information and products presented on the site.

- **Title X-Funded Family Planning Clinics**

To find a family planning clinic in your region, state, or territory, visit <https://opa-fpclinics.icfwebservices.com>.

- **National Cancer Institute (NCI)**

To find out where else you can get free or low-cost screening and follow-up care, call 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237).

- **Planned Parenthood**

1-800-230-PLAN (1-800-230-7526)

To find a local health center, visit www.plannedparenthood.org.*

- **National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association**

To find a local clinic, visit www.nationalfamilyplanning.org.*

Learn More

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)

Cervical cancer home page www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical

HPV home page www.cdc.gov/hpv

- **American Cancer Society (ACS)**

1-800-ACS-2345 (1-800-227-2345)

www.cancer.org*

- **American Social Health Association (ASHA)**

1-919-361-8400

www.ashastd.org/std-sti/hpv.html*

- **Association of Reproductive Health Professionals (ARHP)**

1-202-466-3825

www.arhp.org*

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Glossary

Abnormal (ab-NOR-mal): A finding that is not normal. An abnormal result means that your cervix has cell changes. Your doctor may use medical terms to describe these results. You may hear that your result came back as “LSIL” or “HSIL.” LSIL stands for “**L**ow-grade **S**quamous **I**ntra-epithelial **L**esions”—which means minor cell changes on the cervix. HSIL stands for “**H**igh-grade **S**quamous **I**ntra-epithelial **L**esions”—which means more serious cell changes. Abnormal results do not mean you have cervical cancer. But you need to follow up as told by your doctor.

ASC-US (ASK-us): This word stands for “**A**typical **S**quamous **C**ells of **U**ndetermined **S**ignificance.” Doctors may use this word to describe a Pap test result that is unclear. Your doctor may also use words like “equivocal” or “inconclusive” to describe this result (see below).

Biopsy (BUY-op-SEE): Your doctor uses this test to study abnormal cells. A small piece of tissue is taken from your cervix and checked under a microscope.

Cancer (KAN-ser): A disease that starts when cells in the body turn abnormal and begin to grow out of control. Abnormal (damaged) cells begin in one part of the body and can spread to other body parts. When they spread, the damaged cells replace normal cells. There are many types of cancer. Cancers are named based on where the abnormal cells first started growing. Cervical cancer is when the abnormal cells begin in the cervix.

Cells: The basic unit that makes up all living things.

Cervix (SUR-viks): The part of the womb (or uterus) that opens to the vagina.

Colposcopy (kol-POS-coe-pee): A method your doctor can use to magnify the cervix to see any abnormal cells using an instrument called a colposcope. It is very similar to having your Pap test.

Equivocal (ee-QUIV-o-kal): A Pap test result that is unclear. Your doctor may also use the term “ASC-US” to describe this result.

Fertility (fer-TIL-i-tee): The ability to have babies.



Follow-up: Going back to see your doctor for more testing or treatment.

Genital(s) (JEN-i-tlz): The reproductive organs, especially the external sex organs.

HPV or human papillomavirus (pap-ah-LO-mah-VYE-rus): A very common virus that infects the skin cells. There are many types of HPV. About 40 types, called genital HPV, affect the genital areas of men and women. Some of these types can cause cervical cancer in women. Other types can cause genital warts in men and women.

HPV DNA test (HPV test): A test that looks for HPV on a woman's cervix. Doctors take cells by swabbing the cervix. This is often done at the same time as a Pap test, and may be called co-testing or HPV co-testing. The HPV test can be used at the same time as the Pap test, called the HPV co-test, for women 30 years of age and older. The HPV test may also be used after an inconclusive Pap test, called a reflex HPV test, for women 21 years of age and older.

Inconclusive (in-kuhn-kloo-siv): A Pap test result that is unclear. Your doctor may also use the term "ASC-US" to describe this result.

Pap test: A screening test that looks for early signs of cervical cancer. It finds abnormal cells on a woman's cervix. For this test, your doctor takes cells from your cervix so that they can be looked at with a microscope.

Prevent: To avoid or stop from getting.

Precancer: Cell changes that are not normal, but have not yet turned into cancer.

Screening test: Getting tested for early signs of disease so the problem can be treated before the disease ever develops. Cancer screening tests look for early signs of cancer so you can take steps to avoid ever getting cancer. The Pap and HPV tests screen for early signs of cervical cancer.

Uterus (YOO-tuh-rus): The uterus, or womb, holds a growing baby and helps push the baby out during labor.

Virus (VYE-rus): Something that lives in the body and can cause infections. Viruses are so small that they cannot even be seen with a regular microscope.

Know the Facts

- All women should have regular visits with a health care provider to stay healthy.
- Cervical cancer is caused by a common virus called HPV. Anyone who ever had sex can get HPV.
- Most cervical cancer can be prevented with regular screening tests and follow-up care.
- The Pap test—either alone or with the HPV test—is the best way to find early signs of cervical cancer.
- Right now there is no HPV test for men. HPV is as common in men as in women, but it is easier to find in women.
- If you get an abnormal test result, be sure to follow up as told by your doctor.
- Most women who get abnormal Pap test results or who have HPV do not get cervical cancer—as long as they follow their doctor’s advice for more tests or treatment.

Screening for cervical cancer using an HPV test along with the Pap test is optional for women ages 30 years and older.

If you are 30 years or older, your Pap test is normal, and your HPV test is negative, you can wait 5 years before being tested again for cervical cancer.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- How do I know if I got an HPV test?
- When and how should I expect to get my test results?
- What do my test results mean?
- When is my next Pap test and HPV test? I heard I may be able to wait up to 5 years.
- What other tests or treatment will I need if my Pap or HPV test is abnormal?
 - When do I need to come back for more testing or treatment?
 - What should I expect during and after these tests or treatments?
 - Are there risks or side effects?
 - Will the testing or treatment affect my chance to get or stay pregnant?
 - Will the added tests or treatment be covered by my insurance?
 - Where can I get help to cover the costs?

Be sure to ask your doctor about anything you don't understand. Take a copy of this page with you the next time you see your provider.

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