

Pap Smears: When to Schedule

Pap smears are the best screening tool for detecting and diagnosing cervical cancer. They are safe, effective and saves lives. Regular Pap smear screening makes it possible to find early evidence of cancer—when the disease is easier to cure. When diagnosed early, cervical cancer can be cured in almost all cases.

You have probably been told that you need to have a Pap smear every year. This is true when you start Pap smear screening. But after three normal Pap smears within five years, your doctor may recommend less frequent screening. Research shows that because cervical cancers grow very slowly, a Pap smear at least once every three years will provide nearly the same early detection benefit as an annual test.

Keep in mind that your preferences are important in deciding when to schedule Pap smears. Ultimately, this is a choice for you to make with your doctor.

What is a Pap smear?

A Pap smear is a simple procedure for women that involves swabbing a small sample of cells from the cervix during a pelvic exam. These cells are transferred to a container and then examined and evaluated by a certified laboratory. In addition to testing for cancerous or precancerous conditions, the Pap smear is also useful for detecting some types of infections.

To ensure the most accurate test results, avoid using a vaginal douche or any type of lubricant for 24 hours before having a Pap smear. If you have used either, please inform your doctor prior to the procedure.

Facts about cervical cancer

In most cases, cervical cancer is a slowly progressing disease with few, if any, clear-cut symptoms. An estimated 16,000 women are diagnosed with this disease each year. Half of these women never had a Pap smear. Factors that increase your risk of developing cervical cancer include HIV and certain strains of HPV infections. Other factors can also increase your risk. You and your doctor should discuss whether you need to schedule Pap smears more often.

If you are at higher risk for cervical cancer, it is especially important that you schedule Pap smears regularly.

When to schedule a Pap smear

Women should begin having annual Pap smears at age 21 or when they become sexually active. After having three normal Pap smears in a row within five years, your doctor may recommend screenings less often, but you will need a Pap smear at least once every three years.

If you have had a hysterectomy for cervical cancer, you should still schedule regular Pap smear screenings.

More frequent Pap smears are recommended for women who have had an abnormal pap smear (dysplasia) in the past five years or who are HIV positive. Women with HIV infection may need more frequent Pap smears as their disease progresses.

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Answers to your questions

Who needs more frequent Pap smears?

If you have had dysplasia in the past five years, you should be screened more frequently. Women with HIV infection may also need more frequent screening.

Do I need a Pap smear if I have had a hysterectomy?

If you have had a hysterectomy for benign disease (such as bleeding, endometriosis or fibroids), you do not need a Pap smear. If you have had a hysterectomy for cervical cancer, you should still schedule regular Pap smear screenings.

Should I schedule a pelvic exam if I am not due for a Pap smear?

If you are not due for a Pap smear and are not experiencing any problems, you do not need to come in annually for a pelvic exam.

If I am over 65, do I need to schedule a Pap smear?

If you have had regular Pap smear screenings and all of them have been normal, you and your doctor may decide to stop Pap smear screening after age 65. If you have any new sexual partners, you should still schedule regular Pap smear screenings.

If I am taking birth control pills or hormone replacement pills, do I need Pap smears more often?

These medications do not increase your risk of cervical cancer. You do not need more frequent screening unless you have had a history of abnormal Pap smears or have progressive HIV infection. Your doctor may recommend more frequent visits to check your blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and to do a breast exam.

These guidelines were developed by a team of health care experts from several fields and medical groups including Park Nicollet Clinic, HealthPartners and Mayo Clinic. The team also relied on scientific evidence provided by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. These guidelines will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis as scientific evidence changes.



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