

# Your Pap Test: What to Expect



Talk to your provider about  
how often to get a Pap test.

## What is a Pap test?

A Pap test checks your cervix (the uterus opening) for changes that could lead to cancer. If the result is abnormal, your provider will tell you about additional testing. This way, a person can get treatment before it becomes cancer.

## What causes cancer of the cervix?

Cervical cancer is caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). It is passed by skin-to-skin contact. It can be spread during any kind of sex using the vagina, penis, anus, or mouth.

There are many types of HPV.

- Some HPV types can cause genital warts. Having genital warts does not cause cancer.
- Other HPV types can lead to cancer in the cervix, vulva, anus, and even the mouth and throat.

Most HPV infections go away on their own and cause no problems.

There are ways you can lower your chances of getting an HPV infection. You can:

- Get vaccinated against HPV. This can be done up to 45 years of age.
- Have sex with only one person who only has sex with you.
- Use condoms every time you have sex.
- Choose not to have any sexual contact.
- Stop smoking cigarettes.



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## What should I do ahead of time?

If this is your first Pap test, you may be a little worried. It may help to know what to expect:

- Do not use creams in your vagina for 24 hours before the visit. Also, do not douche (wash the inside of the vagina).
- If you would like, you can ask a family member or friend to come with you.

## What happens during the visit?

Your provider will ask you questions about your medical history. You may have your blood pressure taken. You will be asked to put on a gown and undress from the waist down.

Your provider will explain what to expect. First, you will put a sheet over your stomach and legs. Then, you will lie down on a table. The provider will ask you to put your feet in footrests at the end of the table. This will spread your legs, so the provider can see your vulva (skin around the opening of your vagina).

## What can I expect during the test?

Your provider will gently place a speculum into your vagina. It opens the vagina just enough to be able to see your cervix.

- Your provider will gently swab the opening of your cervix. This takes a sample of cells. This just takes a minute or two.
- You may feel some discomfort, but it should not hurt. Tell your provider if it does.
- It may help to take long, slow, deep breaths to help relax your muscles.
- The sample of cells will be sent to the lab.

Your provider may ask for your permission to do tests for sexually transmitted infections (STIs). They may also look for a vaginal infection.

## What happens after the exam?

Your provider will talk to you about:

- When you will hear about the Pap test result, which can take 1 to 3 weeks.
- When you will need your next Pap test.

## How often should I get a Pap test?

It depends!

- You should have your first Pap test when you are 21 years old. If the results are normal, get tested every 3 years until you are 30.
- If you have never had vaginal sex, ask your provider if you need a Pap test.
- If you are between 30 and 65 years old, you have 3 different screening options:
  - Have a Pap test every 3 years.
  - Have an HPV test every 5 years.
  - Have a Pap and an HPV test every 5 years.

Some people may need more frequent testing. This is especially if you have had an abnormal test result in the past. Your Family PACT provider will discuss how often you should come for screening.

## Looking for a Family PACT provider?

Finding a Family PACT provider near you is easy.

- Go to [www.familypact.org](http://www.familypact.org) and select "Find Providers."
- Call 1-800-942-1054 and get a listing of local Family PACT providers
- Pap tests are free for Family PACT clients if part of a family planning visit.