

If you have any questions, please talk with your physician.

Cervical Cancer Screening

The cervix is the lower, narrow part of the uterus. It sits above the vagina. Cervical cancer screening tests look for cell changes that could become cancerous (precancerous cells) or cancer cells in the cervix.

These tests can find cervical cancer or cell changes in the early stages. Prevention or early treatment is important for the best outcome.

Tests to screen for cervical cancer

The physician may do the following tests to check for cervical cancer:

- Pap smear
- HPV test
- Combination test also known as “co-testing”

During a Papanicolaou (Pap) smear, your physician will perform a pelvic exam using a speculum. They will then swab a sample of cells from the surface of the cervix. They will send the cells to the lab. The lab technician will look at the cells under a microscope to see if they are abnormal.

A human papillomavirus (HPV) test is done in the same way. This will check if you have the HPV virus. This virus can cause cervical cancer. This test can find different types of HPV in cervical cells.

A combination test consists of a Pap smear and HPV test.

When to have a cervical cancer screening

Everyone with a cervix should begin screening for cervical cancer when they are 21 years old. You do not need cervical cancer screening before this, even if you became sexually active at a younger age. The HPV vaccine greatly decreases your chance of cervical cancer, but it does not give you complete protection.

How often to have a cervical cancer screening

The results of your Pap smears will determine how often you should have a cervical cancer screening.

If your past Pap smears are normal, most people will follow this schedule:

- Ages 21 to 29: Have a Pap smear every 3 years
- Ages 30 to 64: Have a Pap smear every 3 years or a Pap smear and HPV test every 5 years
- Ages 65 and older: You can stop cervical cancer screening, if within the past 10 years, you had:
 - 3 normal Pap smears in a row
 - 2 normal Pap smears with HPV tests in a row

If you had your uterus and cervix removed (total hysterectomy surgery), your physician will let you know if you need to continue having Pap smears. You will need to continue to have Pap smears if you have a history of cervical cancer or certain types of cervical dysplasia (abnormal Pap smear). It is important to continue having pelvic exams even if your physician tells you that you no longer need the Pap smear test itself.

Before the test

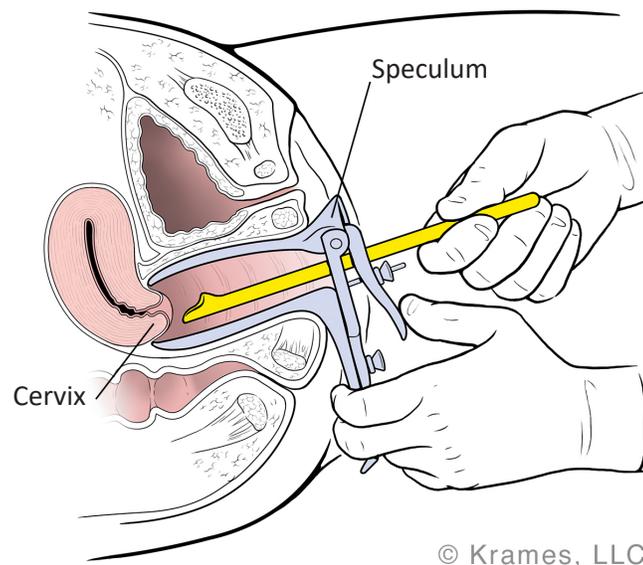
You may want to schedule your test when you do not expect your period. But the physician can often perform the test even if you have your period. You do not need to do anything special to prepare for the test. You do not have to avoid sexual intercourse before cervical cancer screening.

What to expect

You will lie on an exam table. You will have a sheet to cover yourself. Your feet will be in footrests (stirrups). The physician will use a speculum to gently open your vagina (Figure 1).

They will use a small spatula or rubber broom tool to take cells from the cervix. They will then remove cells from inside the cervical canal with a small brush. You may feel slight discomfort or pressure.

Figure 1. Cervical cancer screening



Pap smear results

A normal (or “negative”) result means your physician found no cell changes on your cervix. You should continue to follow regular cervical cancer screening.

If your cells appear abnormal, your physician will do more testing to find the cause. The follow-up tests will depend on your age, your Pap smear results and past results. These follow-up plans may include:

- HPV tests – if you have not had an HPV test, your physician may order one. They can use the cells they collected during your Pap smear.
- Repeat Pap smear in 1 year – Abnormal cells will often be normal in a year. You may also have an HPV test at that time.
- Colposcopy – The physician will use a speculum, like in the Pap smear. They will look at your cervix with a device like a microscope. They may collect cervical tissue samples (biopsy). If the biopsy shows you have cervical cancer or precancer, your physician will talk to you about treatments.

If you have any other questions, please talk with your care team or physician.