

Cervical Cancer Screening

What your abnormal Pap test means.

What is an abnormal Pap test result?

Regular Pap tests are designed to find early cell changes in the cervix, before problems develop. An abnormal Pap test result means that the cells taken from your cervix look different under the microscope than normal cells. Cell changes found through Pap tests are very rarely cancerous but do require follow-up testing.

What causes an abnormal result?

Usually changes in the cells of the cervix are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV):

- HPV is a family of viruses commonly found in both men and women.
- Most people come into contact with HPV through sexual contact at some point in their lifetime. Usually there are no symptoms and often people do not know that they had an HPV infection.
- Usually the infection goes away naturally within two years.
- Sometimes, for reasons that are not well understood, an HPV infection does not go away. Instead, it stays in the body for a long time. Over a number of years, this may slowly lead to cancer if the abnormal cells are not found and, if necessary, treated.

Why is follow-up so important?

Follow-up of abnormal Pap test results is important because it can help prevent cervical cancer. Abnormal cells often change back to normal cells naturally. However, in some women, the abnormal cells do not change back to normal and can develop into cancer. It is important to do follow-up tests of these abnormal cells and if necessary treat them to prevent cervical cancer from developing.

What happens after an abnormal Pap test?

Talk to your health care provider about your results and the follow-up testing needed.

Your follow-up plan depends on the type of cell changes you have:

- You may be asked to repeat your Pap test more often for a short period of time, for example every six months. This will allow time to see if the abnormal cells will change back to normal on their own.
- Your health care provider may suggest an HPV test.
- You may be referred for a special examination called a colposcopy.

What is a colposcopy?

A colposcopy is an exam done in a similar way to a Pap test by a health care provider with special training in this area.

It allows the specialist to see your cervix in more detail with a magnifying lens (colposcope). You will be asked to lie on your back and like a Pap test, an instrument called a speculum will be gently inserted into your vagina to allow the cervix to be seen clearly. A liquid will then be applied to the cervix to help highlight any abnormal areas.

If any area of concern is found, the specialist will take a small sample of tissue (a biopsy) from your cervix for a closer look under a microscope in a lab. The biopsy can help determine if treatment is needed or not.

What happens after a colposcopy?

To ensure the cells return to normal you may need a follow-up Pap test, another colposcopy or you may possibly need treatment. There are many simple methods to successfully remove abnormal cells.

What else can I do?

Follow-up testing is the most important thing you can do. However, your body will be better able to fight off an HPV infection if you are strong and healthy:

- Be tobacco-free and avoid secondhand smoke. Tobacco use can weaken the immune system, which makes it difficult for your body to fight off an infection.
- Eat well; follow Canada's Food Guide.
- Exercise regularly, manage stress and get enough rest to stay healthy.

Remember...

- Going for regular Pap tests is an important step in staying healthy. An abnormal Pap test result can be stressful. However, keep in mind that the reason for going for regular Pap tests is to find early changes in the cervix, before problems develop.
- Following-up on abnormal Pap test results can most often prevent cervical cancer from developing.
- See your health care provider and follow up regularly.

What is the Ontario Cervical Screening Program?

The aim of the Ontario Cervical Screening Program, a program of Cancer Care Ontario and the Government of Ontario, is to help prevent and reduce deaths from cervical cancer. This program will send letters to Ontario women to invite them for Pap testing, advise them of their test results and to remind them when it is time to return for screening. If you do not wish to receive letters from this program, please call 1.866.662.9233.

The Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario has approved the practices and procedures of Cancer Care Ontario's Cancer Screening Registry.

For more information:

- For information about cervical cancer screening, or Ontario's Cervical Screening Program, contact us at screenforlife@cancercare.on.ca or call us toll-free at 1.866.662.9233.
- For general information about health-related programs and services call ServiceOntario at 1.877.234.4343, TTY 1.800.387.5559.
- Find out when it is the right time for you to start screening. Take the Time to Screen Tool at ontario.ca/cancercheck.

Cancer Care Ontario is an organization committed to ensuring accessible services and communications to individuals with disabilities. To receive any part of this document in an alternate format, please contact our communications department at 1.855.460.2647, TTY 416.217.1815, or at publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca.