



## HEALTH MATTERS

### Understanding Cervical Cancer Screening Test Results

Finding and treating abnormal cells in the cervix before they develop into cancer can prevent cervical cancer. There are two tests used for cervical cancer screening: the Pap test and the HPV test. The Pap test (also known as the Pap smear) is a simple and effective way of checking cells from your cervix to see if they are normal or abnormal. Some abnormal cells can develop into cancer. The HPV test is used to look for human papillomavirus (HPV) in the cells from your cervix. HPV is the cause of cervical cancer.

Both tests are used to let your health care provider know whether you need additional evaluation and follow-up. If your Pap test results are abnormal or if HPV is present, your health care provider will decide if you need further testing.

#### What Do My Test Results Mean?

Your Pap test is reported as normal, inconclusive, or abnormal.

- **Normal:** A normal Pap test means that abnormal cells have not been detected in the sample from your cervix. This means that it is not likely that cervical cancer is present. Since the Pap can miss disease, it is important to have your next Pap when it is due, according to guidelines.
- **Inconclusive (also called ASC-US):** ASC-US stands for atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance. An ASC-US result means that your cells don't look normal, but they don't look abnormal either. These results may be referred to as inconclusive. 75% of women with an ASC-US result have no abnormal cells on their cervix.
- **Abnormal:** Abnormal results indicate that cell changes caused by HPV are present. The changes can be mild, moderate or severe. Most women with abnormal cells do not have cancer, but more severe abnormal cells may progress to cancer over time. Abnormal results can be referred to as dysplasia (dis-PLAY-zha), cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) or squamous intraepithelial lesions (SIL).
  - Low-grade SIL (LSIL) or CIN1: mildly abnormal cells that usually go away on their own.
  - High-grade SIL (HSIL), CIN2 or CIN3: moderate to severe abnormal cells. CIN3 also may be referred to as carcinoma in situ.

Your HPV test is reported as either negative for HPV or positive for HPV.

- **Negative for HPV:** A test that is negative for HPV means that no HPV has been found in your cervical cells.
- **Positive for HPV:** A test that is positive for HPV means that high-risk HPV, the type of HPV that can cause cervical cancer, has been found in your cervical cells. Some HPV tests can tell you if you have specific types

of HPV, in particular HPV 16 or 18. HPV 16 and 18 are responsible for 70% of all cervical cancers. Having HPV does not necessarily mean you have cervical cancer or will get cervical cancer.

Depending on your test results, your health care provider may recommend:

- Routine testing, according to guidelines. Depending on your age and tests received, this may be every 3 years or every 5 years.
- Follow-up testing with a Pap test and an HPV test in one year.
- Colposcopy
  - This is a procedure that involves looking at the cervix using a microscope with a bright light.
  - Since abnormal changes on the cervix cannot be easily seen, a health care provider will apply vinegar to the cervix and use the microscope to see the abnormal changes in the cervix.
  - The exam is performed in a health care provider's office.
  - The woman is positioned on the examination table as if she were having a Pap test.
  - If there is an area of abnormal skin on the cervix, a tiny piece is removed and is sent to the laboratory to be evaluated. This is called a biopsy.
  - The biopsy can help determine if you need treatment to remove the abnormal skin.
  - The entire procedure takes about ten to fifteen minutes.

## **Routine Screening and the Well-Woman Visit**

After your visit, make sure you receive your results. Don't assume that no news means good news. If your tests are normal, you will be advised to return for routine screening:

- Women ages 21 to 29: Screening with a Pap test every three years.
- Women ages 30 and older: Screening with a Pap test and HPV test every five years. Another option is to be screened with a Pap test alone every three years.

If you notice unusual vaginal symptoms, such as bleeding between periods or pain during intercourse, you should see your health care provider even if your tests were normal.

You should plan to have a yearly "well-woman visit" even when you are not due for your Pap test. The well-woman visit is a chance to talk about any health concerns, including issues regarding your menstrual cycle, birth control, sexuality, infertility, or menopause (the change of life). During this visit, your health care provider can answer questions, address any concerns, perform a breast exam, and check for some common diseases, such as high blood pressure. Your provider might also perform a pelvic exam. The well-woman visit is different for each woman and is based on her unique needs.

## **If I Have HPV or an Abnormal Pap Test, What Can I Do?**

- Follow-up as recommended by your health care provider.
- Try to remain calm. Remember:
  - HPV is very common; you are not alone.
  - The majority of sexually active Americans get HPV at some time in their lives, while very few will get cervical cancer.
  - HPV usually goes away on its own.
  - Abnormal cells can be treated to prevent cervical cancer.
- Don't assume your partner cheated on you. Genital HPV is not a sign that you or your partner had sex

Leading medical organizations recommend the following next steps based on age and test results:

Women ages 21 to 29		Women ages 30 and older	
Test Results		HPV test is negative	HPV test is positive
<b>Normal Pap</b>	Repeat the Pap test in 3 years	Repeat the Pap and HPV tests in 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeat the Pap and HPV tests in 1 year.</li> <li>• Test for HPV16/18 genotypes. If positive, colposcopy. If negative, repeat the Pap and HPV tests in 1 year.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• In 1 year, if HPV is positive or Pap is ASC-US or abnormal, colposcopy. If HPV is negative and Pap is normal, repeat the Pap and HPV tests in 3 years.</li> </ul>
<b>Unclear or inconclusive Pap (also called ASC-US)</b>	<p>One of the following for women aged 21 to 24:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeat Pap test at 12-month intervals; if two consecutive negative tests, return to routine screening.</li> <li>• Reflex HPV test; if HPV-positive, repeat Pap in 12 months; if HPV-negative, return for Pap testing in 3 years.</li> </ul> <p>One of the following for women aged 25 to 29:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HPV test; if HPV-positive, then colposcopy; if HPV-negative, then Pap and HPV tests in 3 years.</li> <li>• Repeat Pap test at 12 months; if negative, return to routine screening; if ASC-US or abnormal, then colposcopy.</li> </ul>	Repeat the Pap and HPV tests in 3 years	Colposcopy
<b>Abnormal Pap (LSIL or HSIL)</b>	<p>Women aged 21 to 24:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LSIL: Repeat Pap test at 12 months</li> <li>• HSIL: Colposcopy</li> </ul> <p>Women aged 25 to 29:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LSIL: Colposcopy</li> <li>• HSIL: Colposcopy or immediate treatment</li> </ul>	<p>LSIL: Repeat Pap and HPV tests in 12 months or colposcopy</p> <p>HSIL: Colposcopy or immediate treatment</p>	<p>LSIL: Colposcopy</p> <p>HSIL: Colposcopy or immediate treatment</p>

outside the relationship. A person can have HPV for a very long time before it is found.

- Stop smoking. Women who smoke are more likely to have abnormal Pap tests and more likely to develop cervical cancer than women who do not smoke.
- Continue (or start) healthy habits, such as eating a nutritious diet.

Educate yourself. The following Web sites offer additional information:

American Cancer Society  
<http://www.cancer.org/>

American Social Health Association -  
HPV Resource Center  
<http://www.ashastd.org/std-sti/hpv.html>

Eyes on the Prize: Support and Information for  
Gynecologic Cancers  
<http://www.eyesontheprize.org/>

Foundation for Women's Cancer  
<http://www.foundationforwomenscancer.org/>

National Cervical Cancer Coalition  
<http://www.nccc-online.org/>

National Women's Health Resource Center  
<http://www.healthywomen.org/>