

HPV TESTING

Information for Women Having Pap Tests

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What does HPV testing have to do with Pap tests?

Pap tests check for changes in the cells of your cervix. These changes are important when they are the kind that could turn into cervical cancer over time. Women with these cell changes are followed and treated if needed so that cervical cancer does not develop. Hundreds of women's lives are saved every year in Alberta because of Pap tests.

Sometimes the lab sees cell changes and it's not clear whether they are important. In the past, women with unclear changes were asked to repeat the Pap test in 6 months. A new test can tell right away whether a woman with these unclear changes needs follow-up care. This new test looks for high-risk types of the human papillomavirus (HPV).

What is HPV?

HPV is a very common virus. Most women will get HPV at some time in their lives. There are many types of HPV and most are harmless. Some types can cause changes in the cells of the cervix. These types are known as high-risk. Most people don't even know when they have high-risk HPV because there are no symptoms. Usually the body fights the infection and the virus clears within two years.

In some women the HPV infection does not clear. These women are at risk of more serious cell changes that could lead to cervical cancer if left untreated. Almost all cases of cervical cancer are caused by HPV.

Turn over for more information

How does someone get HPV?

HPV passes easily by skin-to-skin contact in the genital area. More than 7 out of every 10 sexually active people will get HPV in their lifetime. HPV can spread by touching, oral sex, or intercourse with a partner of either sex. Because there are no symptoms, most people do not know they are passing HPV to their partner. HPV is so common that most people get it soon after they become sexually active.

Will my Pap test sample be tested for HPV?

If you are 30 years or older and your Pap test shows cell changes that are hard for the lab to read, your Pap test sample will be tested for HPV. This is called reflex testing. When women in this age group have high-risk HPV, their infections are less likely to clear. This increases their risk of developing cervical cancer in the future.

HPV reflex testing is not useful for women younger than 30. This is because HPV is more common among younger women and will usually clear on its own. In this age group, HPV testing does not help in deciding which women need follow-up care.



What if my HPV result is negative?

If the HPV result is negative, you will not need any follow-up tests. Your risk of developing cervical cancer over the next few years is about the same as women who have a normal Pap test result. However it is important to continue having Pap tests regularly.

What if my HPV result is positive?

A positive HPV result means the changes seen in your cervical cells were most likely caused by a high-risk HPV type. Your healthcare provider will refer you to a specialist for a colposcopy, an exam similar to a Pap test. A high-powered microscope is used to look closely at any abnormal areas of your cervix. If needed, abnormal areas can be treated so that cancer does not develop.

Having the virus doesn't mean that you or your partner were unfaithful. The virus can hide in your body for years without any sign that it's there. You or your partner may have been infected long before you became a couple.

What if I've had the HPV vaccine?

Even if you've had the HPV vaccine:

- you should still have Pap tests regularly
- HPV reflex tests will be done by the lab if needed

This is because the vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV that cause cervical cancer.

Will my Pap test and HPV results be sent in the mail?

The Alberta Cervical Cancer Screening Program (ACCSP) is coordinated by Alberta Health Services in partnership with healthcare providers. The ACCSP mails Pap test results to women across Alberta. Result letters do not say whether HPV testing was done, but they do say whether follow-up care is needed. To learn more about the ACCSP and how the program works please call us at 1-866-727-3926 or visit www.screeningforlife.ca/cervical.

How can I learn more about HPV and how to protect myself?

To learn more ask your healthcare provider, or see the brochure *HPV: What You Need to Know and Do* available at www.screeningforlife.ca/cervical.

