Allina Health

If You Have an Abnormal Pap Test Result

Pap Test

A Pap test is used to find cell changes in the cervix. The cervix connects the uterus (womb) to the vagina (birth canal).

The surface of the cervix is made of 2 different types of cells:

- **squamous:** These are thin, flat cells that form the surface of the cervix.
- **glandular:** These are tall cells found in the opening in the center of the cervix or in the lining of the uterus.

These cells can go through changes which can make them look abnormal. If your health care provider tells you that your Pap test results are abnormal, you should not be alarmed.

Although some abnormal conditions can become cancerous, many do not.

Only a very small number of women with abnormal Pap test results have cancer. Most of the time, an abnormal Pap test just means that you need some follow-up testing.

If you have an abnormal Pap test, it is important to talk about these results with your health care provider so you understand what the results mean and what is the recommended treatment.

Abnormal Pap Test Results

There are a number of terms used to report abnormal results.

- **ASC (atypical squamous cells)**: thin flat cells that form the surface of the cervix. There are two groups of ASC:
  - ASC-US (atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance). These cells are mild abnormalities.
  - ASC-H (atypical squamous cells not excluding HSIL). These cells are abnormal and may be at a higher risk of being precancerous.
- **AGC (atypical glandular cells):** These cells are abnormal and your health care provider will need to do more testing to find out why.
- **LSIL (low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion).** There are early changes of cells in an area of abnormal tissue of the cervix. These cells are mild abnormalities mostly caused by human papillomavirus (HPV).
- **HSIL (high-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion).** There are more advanced changes in the size and shape of abnormal cells. This means the cells look very different under the microscope compared to normal cells.

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Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

Some abnormal Pap test results can be caused by a viral infection. This virus can be found by special testing done when your cells are looked at by the lab.

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the name of a group of viruses that includes more than 200 different types. Infection with HPV is common. Many types of HPV are sexually transmitted. Some types of HPV may cause problems such as genital warts or cervical cancer.

The HPV vaccine (given by a shot) can prevent most of the cancers caused by HPV if it is given before exposure to the virus.

The HPV vaccine is recommended for boys and girls at age 11 or 12. It may be given starting at age 9. This will help protect them before they are exposed to the virus.

- Most children who get the first dose before 15 years of age need 2 doses of HPV vaccine.
- Anyone who gets the first dose on or after age 15, and younger people with certain conditions caused by weakened immune systems, needs 3 doses.

Follow-up Procedures

Depending on your Pap test results, your health care provider may recommend that you repeat your Pap test or that you have a colposcopy.

During a colposcopy, your health care provider will use a colposcope (a lighted, magnifying instrument) to look closely at areas of your cervix and vagina that may be abnormal.

During this exam, you may have:

- a biopsy. Your health care provider will gently remove a piece of tissue from your cervix to be sent to a lab for study under a microscope.
- endocervical curettage. Your health care provider will gently scrape cells from inside the canal of your cervix with an instrument called a curette. A lab will study these cells for signs of abnormalities.

Treatment

You may need treatment for abnormal cells that have a high chance of becoming cancerous. Several treatment options are available:

- LEEP (loop electrosurgical excision procedure): abnormal cells are surgically removed using electric current passed through a thin wire loop.
- cryotherapy: abnormal cervical cells are frozen which destroys them and causes them to shed.
- laser therapy: abnormal cervical cells are removed with a narrow beam of intense light.
- conization (cone biopsy): a cone-shaped piece of tissue from the center of your cervix is surgically removed.

After Treatment

All treatments have some risks (such as heavy vaginal bleeding) and may need follow-up testing (such as a colposcopy, Pap test or HPV testing). Some treatments may affect future pregnancies.

It is important to talk about the risks with your health care provider before you are treated.

Information adapted from the National Cancer Institute

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