

**P**ap smears are the best screening tool for detecting and diagnosing cervical cancer. They are safe, effective and saves lives.

Regular Pap smear screening makes it possible to find early evidence of cancer—when the disease is easier to cure. When it is diagnosed early, cervical cancer can be cured in most cases.

You have probably been told that you need to have a Pap smear every year. This is true when you start Pap smear screening. But after three normal Pap smears within five years, your doctor may recommend less frequent screening. Research shows that because cervical cancers grow very slowly, a Pap smear at least once every three years will provide nearly the same early detection benefit as an annual test.

Keep in mind that your preferences are important in deciding when to schedule Pap smears. Ultimately, this is a choice for you to make with your doctor.

## What is a Pap smear?

Pap smears are simple procedures for women that involve swabbing a small sample of cells from the cervix during a pelvic exam. These cells are transferred to a container and then examined and evaluated by a certified laboratory. In addition to testing for cancerous or precancerous conditions, the Pap smear is also useful for detecting other types of infections.

To ensure the most accurate test results, avoid using a vaginal douche or any type of lubricant for 24 hours before having a Pap smear. If you have used either, please inform your doctor prior to your procedure.

## Facts about cervical cancer

In most cases, cervical cancer is a slowly progressing disease with few, if any, clear-cut symptoms. An estimated 16,000 women are diagnosed with this disease each year. Half of these women never had a Pap smear. Factors that increase your risk of developing cervical cancer include HIV and certain strains of HPV infections. Other factors can also increase your risk. You and your doctor should discuss whether you need to schedule Pap smears more often.

If you are at higher risk for cervical cancer, it is especially important that you schedule Pap smears regularly.

## Human papilloma virus (HPV)

HPV is a very common infection. Each year in the United States, about 5.5 million people become infected.

A new vaccine for HPV has been licensed for women ages nine through 26. Receiving the HPV vaccine does not change the current recommendations for cervical cancer screening (Pap smears). Talk to your health care provider about whether the HPV vaccine is appropriate for you.

## When to schedule a Pap smear

Screening of cervical cytology (cervical cells—Pap smear) should begin by approximately three years after first sexual intercourse or by age 21, whichever comes first. After having three normal Pap smears in a row within five years, your doctor may recommend screenings less often, but you will need a Pap smear at least once every three years.

If you have had a hysterectomy for cervical cancer, you should still schedule regular Pap smear screenings.

More frequent Pap smears are recommended if you have had an abnormal pap smear (dysplasia) in the past five years or if you are HIV positive. If you have HIV infection you may need more frequent Pap smears as the disease progresses.

## Answers to your questions

### ***Who needs more frequent Pap smears?***

If you have had dysplasia in the past five years, you should be screened more frequently. If you have HIV infection you may also need more frequent screening.

### ***Do I need a Pap smear if I have had a hysterectomy?***

If you have had a hysterectomy for benign disease (such as bleeding, endometriosis or fibroids), you do not need a Pap smear. If you have had a hysterectomy for cervical cancer, you should still schedule regular Pap smear screenings.

### ***Should I schedule a pelvic exam if I am not due for a Pap smear?***

If you are not due for a Pap smear and are not experiencing any problems, you do not need to come in annually for a pelvic exam.

### ***If I am over 65, do I need to schedule a Pap smear?***

If you have had regular Pap smear screenings and all of them have been normal, you and your doctor may decide to stop Pap smear screening after age 65. If you have any new sexual partners, you should still schedule regular Pap smear screenings.

### ***If I am taking birth control pills or hormone replacement pills, do I need Pap smears more often?***

These medications do not increase your risk of cervical cancer. You do not need more frequent screening unless you have had a history of abnormal Pap smears or have progressive HIV infection. Your doctor may recommend more frequent visits to check your blood pressure and cholesterol levels and to do a breast exam.

If you want more information on any medical topic, please contact the Park Nicollet Health Library. A medical librarian can help you find out what you need to know.

Web site: [parknicollet.com/healthlibrary](http://parknicollet.com/healthlibrary)

E-mail: [library@parknicollet.com](mailto:library@parknicollet.com)

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This brochure is based on guidelines developed by a team of health care experts at the Institute for Clinical Systems Improvement (ICSI), of which Park Nicollet Health Services is an active member. It will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis as scientific evidence changes. This material is for informational purposes only and is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.

# Pap Smears

## When to Schedule