

Choosing Wisely[®]

An initiative of the ABIM Foundation

ConsumerReports[®]



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
FAMILY PHYSICIANS



Pap tests

When you need them—and when you don't

A Pap test is a test of cells in the cervix. The cervix is the opening between the vagina and the uterus. The Pap test looks for cells that are not normal and can cause cancer of the cervix. This is also called *cervical cancer*.

Most women ages 21 to 65 need regular Pap tests. But teenage girls and older women usually don't need them. Here's why:

Pap tests usually don't help low-risk women.

Many women have a very low risk for cervical cancer.

- Cervical cancer is rare in women younger than 21, even if they are sexually active. Abnormal cells in younger women usually return to normal without treatment.
- Cervical cancer is rare in women over 65 who have had regular Pap tests with normal results.
- Pap tests are not useful for women who have had their cervix removed during a hysterectomy, unless the hysterectomy was done because there were cancer or pre-cancer cells in the cervix.

Pap tests can have risks.

A Pap test can be uncomfortable and cause a little bleeding.



The test may show something that does not look normal but would go away on its own. Abnormal results cause anxiety. And they can lead to repeat Pap tests and follow-up treatment that you may not need.

The tests cost money.

A Pap test is done during a pelvic exam. Although costs vary across the country and even from practice to practice, any money spent on an unnecessary test is money wasted.

So, when do I need a Pap test?

That depends on your age, your medical history, and your risks.

- **Ages 21 to 30:** You should have a Pap test every three years. Cervical cancer takes 10 to 20 years to develop, so you don't need the test each year. You do not need a pap test before age 21, even if you are sexually active.
- **Ages 30 to 65:** The new guidelines from the American Cancer Society and others say that you can have the Pap test every five years—as long as you have a test for the human papillomavirus, or HPV, at the same time. HPV is a sexually transmitted infection that can cause cervical cancer.
- **Age 65 or older:** You do not need Pap tests if your recent ones have been normal. If you have risk factors for cervical cancer, ask your doctor how often you need a Pap test. Risk factors include: pre-cancer cells in your cervix, a history of cervical cancer, or a weak immune system.

Advice from Consumer Reports

How can you protect yourself against cervical cancer?

The best way to protect yourself against cervical cancer is to protect yourself against the human papillomavirus, or HPV. HPV is a sexually transmitted infection that can cause cervical cancer.

Get the HPV vaccine. Girls and boys should get the vaccine when they are 11 or 12. It is given in three shots over six months. Girls and women ages 13 to 26 should get the vaccine if they have not yet had it. All boys and men ages 13 to 21, and men ages 22 to 26 who have sex with men or have problems with their immune systems should get the vaccine if they have not yet had it.

Women who get the vaccine still need regular Pap tests because the vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV that can cause cancer.

Limit your sexual partners. The fewer partners you have, the lower your risk of getting HPV.

Use condoms.

Condoms help reduce the risk of getting HPV. Men who use them are less likely to be infected and to infect their partners.

Condoms do not prevent all infections, however.

Don't smoke. Smoking cigarettes and breathing second-hand smoke increases your risk of cervical cancer. Women who smoke are two times more likely to get cervical cancer.

Take these steps to make your Pap test as accurate as possible.

- Make your appointment for at least five days after your menstrual period stops.
- For 48 hours before the test: Don't have sex, and don't use douches, tampons, birth control foams or gels, vaginal creams, moisturizers or lubricants, or vaginal medicines.



This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

© 2016 Consumer Reports. Developed in cooperation with the American Academy of Family Physicians. To learn more about the sources used in this report and terms and conditions of use, visit

ConsumerHealthChoices.org/about-us/.