

THE PAP TEST: LATEST RECOMMENDATIONS 2008

WHAT IS IT?

The Pap test is a random sampling of cells from the cervix to screen them for changes that could become cervical cancer. We know that pre-cancerous changes are caused by human papilloma virus (commonly known as HPV). These abnormal cells may not be cancer yet, but if the cells are not monitored and possibly treated, the changes may become cancer. Because the sample is random and relatively few cells are screened, the Pap test may miss a cluster of abnormal cells; therefore routine testing is recommended every year or two. Abnormal tests require closer follow-up and monitoring. You will be notified by your clinician if you have an abnormal test. The current guidelines for testing and follow-up are age-related, so you will find recommendations for your care will be different depending on if it is before your twenty-first or after your thirtieth.

WHO SHOULD HAVE A PAP TEST DONE?

It is now recommended that a woman be first screened three years after she becomes sexually active or by twenty-one years of age, whichever comes first. Many young women are infected with HPV but spontaneously clear the virus within a year or two. Testing too soon may cause unnecessary anxiety as well as unneeded follow-up examinations and unwarranted treatment. It usually takes a number of years after exposure to HPV for cancer to occur, but having Pap tests regularly gives you the best chance of finding cell changes or cervical cancer early when they are easy to treat.

WHAT DOES AN ABNORMAL PAP TEST MEAN?

Abnormal PAP tests are not significant unless they have cell changes caused by HPV infection. Most men and women are infected with HPV at some time in their lives. Several strains can infect the genital tract and may cause genital warts in men or women. The subtypes that cause warts on the hands and feet do not cause cervical cancer. However, of the 100 or so strains of HPV that exist, only about 15 infect the cervix and can cause pre-cancerous changes leading to cervical cancer. The terminology for PAP tests has changed in recent years. We use this classification system: ASCUS (Atypical Squamous Cells of Undetermined Significance), LSIL (Low-grade Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion), ASC-H (Atypical Squamous Cells – cannot rule out High-grade Lesion), or HSIL (High-grade Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion).

WHAT IS DONE ABOUT ABNORMAL PAP TEST?

For women under 21, the first abnormal pap with ASCUS or LSIL is simply with Pap tests at one year intervals. If the test is still abnormal after two years (or age 21), the woman is instructed to have colposcopy. (See below). For women 21 and older with ASCUS, further tests for the presence of HPV are done at an additional charge to your account. For ASCUS + HPV, LSIL, ASC-H, or the guidelines recommend colposcopy within a few months to establish the degree of abnormality that exists and to establish a proper follow-up plan.

WHAT IS COLPOSCOPY?

Colposcopy involves looking at the cervix through a special microscope during a pelvic exam. If abnormal tissue is seen, tissue samples (or biopsies) are done to further study the cells. Biopsy procedures may be mildly uncomfortable. Your clinician will talk to you about how to prevent discomfort along with the details about the procedure at your first consult appointment. After a colposcopy examination, a decision can be made regarding possible treatment versus close monitoring such as Pap tests every six months.

When there are two consecutive normal PAP tests in a row, the Pap test can revert to annual to confirm that the body has healed itself of abnormal.

NOW WHAT?

Sometimes the body heals these problems without any intervention, and this is ideal. Nicotine concentrates in cervical tissues and smokers have 6 to 7 times the risk of developing cervical cancer than a non-smoker. If you use tobacco products, stop now. Healthy nutrition and adequate sleep and exercise keep your stress levels down and assist the immune system in healing. Close surveillance of your condition may be adequate, but treatment may be necessary. There are numerous treatments for pre-cancerous changes in the cervix that either trim or freeze the affected tissue off. These options can be discussed with your colposcopy provider. The goal is to prevent cancer from forming and to preserve your sexual health and also fertility should you desire to bear children in the future

CAN I TRANSMIT THIS TO MY PARTNER?

The HPV virus is acquired by direct skin-to-skin contact during intimate sexual or sensual contact. Being exposed to the same virus being passed back and forth does not make it more difficult to clear the virus. There is currently no way to test or treat a male partner for the subtypes of the virus that cause pre-cancerous changes of the cervix. It is not possible to know when or from whom an individual was infected. Treatment of women with pre-cancerous changes is directed at eradicating the abnormal tissue and having the body heal the area to prevent that cell line from becoming cancerous. Increasing numbers of sexual partners increases the risk of transmission of different strains of the virus. We do know that consistent condom use does decrease the risk of transmission of HPV to new partners.

PREVENTION OF HPV

Within the last few years a new vaccine (Gardasil) has become available to help prevent genital warts and cervical changes related to HPV. Gardasil protects against the 2 subtypes of HPV that cause external genital warts as well as 2 strains that account for 70% of the cases of cervical cancer. The vaccine is presently recommended only for females, but research is ongoing for males. A series of three shots is given, the second shot at least two months after the first, and the third at least four months after the second. These immunizations are available at the Student Health Center by appointment. The shots cost around \$150 each, and may not be reimbursable by your medical insurance. Student Health Insurance does have a Wellness benefit which may help pay for these immunizations. Check with our insurance office 459-4480 if you want more information regarding charges.

APPROXIMATE COSTS AT UCSC RELATED TO HPV AND ABNORMAL PAP TESTS

Pap smear lab test and processing fee: \$33

HPV testing (if pap ASCUS): additional \$28

Colposcopy appointment: \$300-\$500

HPV vaccine: \$ 450 for series of 3

Condoms for prevention: \$0.25

Peace of mind: priceless

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Appointment Desk: (831) 459-2500 To leave a message for your Clinician: (831) 459-2780

Websites: <http://cme.asccp.org/faq/treatHPV.cfm>

http://www.acog.org/publications/patient_education/bp085.cfm