



## The Papanicolaou Test (Pap Smear or Pap Test)

The Papanicolaou test (also called the Pap smear or Pap test) is a screening test used to detect pre-cancerous and cancerous cells of the cervix. Abnormal cervical cells are caused by a very common virus called Human Papillomavirus (HPV). Many women will become infected with HPV in their lifetime. Usually infections go away without treatment. If pre-cancerous cells are identified early, they can be treated prior to progressing to cervical cancer. Since the Pap test was first introduced in the 1940s, it is estimated that the incidence of cervical cancer has been reduced by as much as 99% in regularly screened populations.

In 2012, after review of the available evidence, The US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF), The American Cancer Society (ACS), The American Society for Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology (ASCCP), and The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) issued guidelines suggesting:

- Pap testing should begin in all women at age 21.
- Pap testing for most women should take place every three years until age 30.
- From age 30 through 65, it is recommended to perform Pap testing together with a test for Human Papillomavirus (HPV). The timing of Pap testing will depend on previous results and current results.
- For many women over 65, Pap testing can be stopped.

While many women may be worried that less frequent Pap testing is detrimental to their health care needs, this is not the case. The purpose of the new guidelines is to reduce unnecessary testing and interventions, as well as to prevent the anxiety and potential harm that women may experience from abnormal tests and unnecessary treatments. A review of the evidence to date shows that screening at less frequent intervals prevents cervical cancer just as well, has decreased costs, and avoids unnecessary interventions that could be harmful.

Remember, there is more to women's health than just your Pap test, and it is still important to visit your OB-GYN provider yearly for a comprehensive well-woman visit. During a well-woman visit, OB-GYN providers assess several things including; current health status, appropriate screening tests that should be performed, nutrition, physical activity, sexual practices, contraception needs, and tobacco, alcohol and drug use. The standard physical exam includes measurement of body mass index (BMI) and blood pressure. Annual breast exams continue to be recommended, along with annual mammograms in women age 40 and over to screen for breast cancer. An annual pelvic examination is done to visualize the vulva, vaginal canal, and cervix in addition to palpating pelvic structures like the uterus and ovaries.