

Cancer Prevention

Cervical Cancer

Early Detection of Cervical Cancer – The Pap Test

What is the cervix?

- The cervix is part of a woman's reproductive organs. The cervix is at the top of the vagina and is the opening to the uterus (womb).

What we know about cervical cancer (cancer of the cervix):

- Early changes in the cervix can happen without pain or other symptoms.
- If changes in the cervix are not found and treated, the changes in the cervix can grow into cancer.
- Cervical cancer is 90% preventable when changes are found early.
- The only way to find changes in the cervix is to have regular Pap tests.
- Changes in the cervix can be treated early, up to 10 years before cancer develops.
- Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccine prevents cervical cancer. For more information see immunization.

What puts you at risk of developing cervical cancer?

- Sexual intercourse before the age of 18
- Many sexual partners
- Human Papillomavirus (HPV) (also called genital warts), which is a virus passed during sexual activity and sexual intercourse.
- Smoking
- Not getting a Pap test
- Also see Preventing Sexually Transmitted Infections

What is a Pap test?

- The Pap test is a simple test used to look at the cells of the cervix (opening of the uterus).
- The Pap test can be done by your doctor or specially trained nurse.
- By having a Pap test, changes in the cervix can be found early and treated before cancer ever develops.
- Pap test results showing cell changes do not always mean cancer.
- If there are changes, your doctor may do the Pap test again or send you to a specialist for treatment.



When should a Pap test be done?

- When you do not have your period.
- When you have not had sex for 24 hours before the test.
- When you have not douched or put any foams in your vagina for 48 hours.

Pap Test Guidelines

Every year once you start having sex (this includes any sexual activity).

If your tests are normal for three years in a row, they you will need a Pap test every two to three years --- ask you doctor or nurse about how often you should have a Pap test.

Pap tests may be stopped after you turn 70, if you had 4 normal Pap tests in the past 10 years.

You still need a regular Pap test even if:

- You are not currently having sex
- You are no longer using birth control
- You are beyond childbearing years

The single greatest risk for cervical cancer is not having regular Pap tests. By taking time for this simple test, you can prevent cervical cancer.

Links for more information

Ontario Cervical Screening Program
Canadian Cancer Society
Health Canada
Cancer Care Ontario

