

# The importance of a Pap test

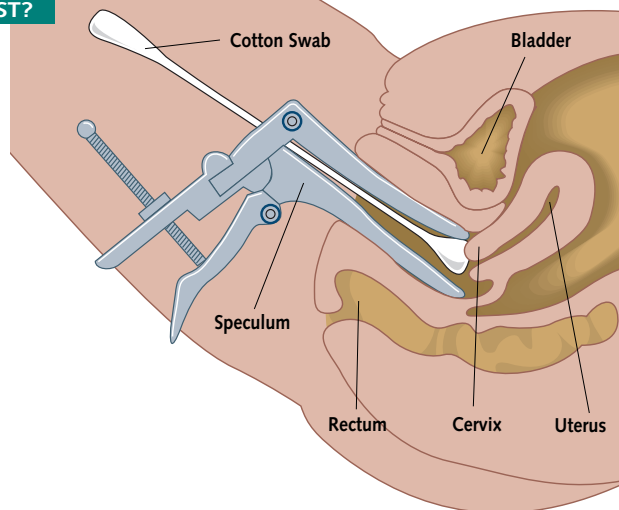
Women can have a simple screening test each year that helps protect against the development of cancer of the **cervix**, the lower part of the **uterus** (womb).

The Pap test is performed during a pelvic exam and provides warning of abnormal cell growth. A primary goal of the Pap test and other follow-up procedures is to prevent cervical cancer by identifying and treating abnormal conditions that may lead to this type of cancer. Having an annual Pap test has been shown to reduce the rates of cervical cancer.

But the test is not 100% accurate in its ability to detect early stages of cancer. Researchers, including those reporting in the May 5, 1999, issue of *JAMA*, have been continuing their efforts to refine the accuracy of the test.

## WHAT IS A PAP TEST?

It is a screening test that examines the cells in and around the cervix to detect abnormalities that could lead to cancer. Also called **Pap smear**, the test is named after Dr. George Papanicolaou, who developed the test in the 1940s.



## HOW OFTEN DO YOU NEED A PAP TEST?

All sexually active women or all women over the age of 18 (whichever comes first) should get a Pap test once a year. If you are not at increased risk for cervical changes and you have 3 normal tests in a row, you may be able to have the test less often. Women who are at increased risk include those who:

- Have more than one sexual partner or a sexual partner who has had more than one partner
- Have had genital warts or infection with the **human papillomavirus** (HPV), a sexually transmitted infection
- Are infected with **human immunodeficiency virus** (HIV)
- Use tobacco

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The Pap test detects changes in the cells of the cervix at an early stage. So having the test performed regularly helps to ensure that conditions that could lead to cancer are caught early and treated.

## BEFORE A PAP TEST:

- For about 2 days before the test, do not douche or use spermicidal foams, creams, jellies, or vaginal medicines (except when directed by a doctor).
- This test should not be done while you are menstruating.

## WHAT TO EXPECT:

- You lie on the exam table with your legs placed in holders called **stirrups**.
- Your doctor will look at the vaginal area for any signs of infection or other problems.
- A device called a **speculum** will be used to widen the vagina so that the doctor can see the cervix.
- The doctor will use a long cotton swab to collect cell samples from your cervix.
- During the rest of the pelvic exam, the doctor will then check your fallopian tubes, ovaries, and uterus by inserting two gloved fingers inside your vagina. He or she will use the other hand to feel outside over the lower abdomen for any lumps or tenderness. This only takes a few minutes.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
Send business-size self-addressed stamped envelope to:  
ACOG Resource Center  
*The Pap Test* (#AP085)  
P.O. Box 96920  
Washington, DC 20090-6920 or  
[www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org)
- National Cancer Institute  
Cancer Information Service  
800/4-CANCER  
800/332-8615 (TTY) or  
[www.nci.nih.gov](http://www.nci.nih.gov)

## INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at [www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm](http://www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm).

Additional Sources: National Cancer Institute, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, *AMA's Complete Guide to Women's Health*

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