



Pap Test

What is a Pap test?

A Pap test is a procedure where cells are scraped from the cervix (lower part of the uterus or womb) and examined under a microscope for any malignant changes. Your care provider may also carry out a test for Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) during your Pap, as it is the most important risk factor for cervical cancer.

Pap tests are a part of the routine national cervical cancer screening offered to women. Guidance on cervical screening varies by province starting at age 21 or 25 and repeated every 2-3 years until age 65 to 70.¹

New HPV self-tests

The attitude towards pap tests is changing, and new HPV self-tests are currently being rolled out in certain provinces. Human Papillomavirus (HPV) accounts for up to 70% of cervical cancer cases and testing for high-risk strains of the virus can help assess your risk.

The head of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada predicts that these new HPV self-tests will completely replace Pap tests over the next few years.

These take-home tests include a self-administered vaginal swab that would be sent away for HPV testing. Speak to your care provider about which testing option (Pap vs. HPV self-test) is recommended in your province.

How to prepare for your Pap test

When it comes to preparing for your Pap test there are a few 'don'ts':

- Don't book your appointment while you are having your period.
- Don't have sexual intercourse for at least 24hrs before your test.
- Don't use any vaginal douches, vaginal sprays or vaginal medicines for at least 24 hours before your test.
- Don't have a Pap test if you are being treated for a cervical or vaginal infection.

What to expect during your Pap test

A Pap test is usually done in a doctor's or nurse's office and only takes a couple of minutes.

During the test, you will lie on your back with your legs bent and spread apart or feet up in stirrups. Your care provider will place a speculum into the vagina. This is a clear plastic or metal device that keeps the vagina open while the test is performed. You may feel some pressure when the speculum is inserted but it is not usually painful. Using a small stick, spatula and/or brush, your provider will gently scrape the surface of the cervix to pick up cells. The collected cells are then placed into a container with special liquid and sent to a lab for examination under a microscope.

You may experience some light bleeding following your Pap test. Your provider may offer you a light pad or panty liner if you are worried about bleeding.

Pap tests offer 60% accuracy for cervical cancer, new DNA-based HPV tests offer accurate detection close to 90%.²

Interpreting your results

Your Pap test results will usually be described as normal or abnormal. Abnormal results are further classified based on the type of cell that has changed and how different they look from normal cells. It is very common for cervical cells to undergo abnormal changes; some will return to normal on their own and others may develop into cancer if left untreated (see cervical cancer fact sheet).

The cervix is made up of two different types of cells. Squamous cells come from the surface of the cervix and glandular cells come from inside the opening of the cervix. Cells that are only slightly abnormal are described as having 'low-grade' changes whereas cells that have significant abnormalities are described as having 'high-grade' changes.

The following table outlines possible Pap test results:

Normal A normal result, sometimes described as 'negative', means no abnormal or cancerous cells were found.

Unclear (ASC-US) Atypical squamous cells - undetermined significance (ASC-US) means some squamous cells do not look completely normal. Sometimes this result will also be described more simply as 'inconclusive' or 'unclear'.

Squamous cell changes

Atypical squamous cells (ASC) means the cells don't look normal, this is the most common abnormal finding.³

Low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion (LSIL) means the cells have mild changes in size and shape.

High-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion (HSIL) means the cells have significant and possibly pre-cancerous changes. These changes are not yet cancerous but have a high chance of progressing to cancer.

Abnormal

Squamous cell carcinoma (SCS) means there are cancer cells present.

Glandular cell changes

Atypical glandular cells (AGC) means the cells don't look normal.

Adenocarcinoma in situ (AIS) means there are cancer cells present but they have not yet spread into the deeper or surrounding tissues.

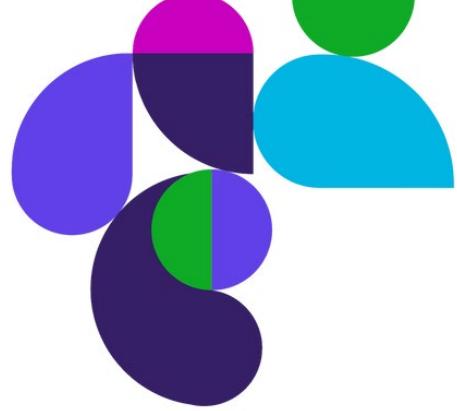
Adenocarcinoma means there is cancer present.

Unsatisfactory An unsatisfactory result means there are not enough cells in the sample to accurately complete the test. In this case, your provider may ask you to come back for another Pap test.



You just received an abnormal result - now what?

Your care provider will direct you towards next steps following an abnormal Pap test result. Depending on the type and severity of cell changes, you may be asked to repeat the Pap test in 6 months. You may also be referred for a colposcopy, a camera test to visualize the uterus and take further samples for testing.



How can Teladoc Health help?

If you think you are due for a Pap test, our [Find a Doctor](#) service can locate a general practitioner or gynecologist who is available to carry out the procedure for you.

If you have received an abnormal Pap test result and have questions about next steps, reach out to our [Expert Medical Opinion](#) team.

This guide is not meant to provide medical advice or service and should not be construed as the professional advice of Teladoc Health. As such, Teladoc Health does not guarantee or assume responsibility for the correctness of the information or its applicability regarding any specific factual situation. Personal health problems should be brought to the attention of physicians and appropriate health care professionals.

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1. Canadian Cancer Society / Société canadienne du cancer. "Pap Test." Canadian Cancer Society, Canadian Cancer Society, cancer.ca/en/treatments/tests-and-procedures/pap-test. Accessed 5 Jan. 2024.

2. "HPV Testing." Canadian Partnership Against Cancer, Canadian Partnership Against Cancer, 20 Sept. 2023, www.partnershipagainstcancer.ca/topics/cervical-cancer-screening-in-canada-2021-2022/modalities-for-cervical-screening/hpv-testing/.

3. "Abnormal Pap Test." Abnormal Pap Test | HealthLink BC, HealthLink BC, www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/abnormal-pap-test. Accessed 5 Jan. 2024.

4. "What Do My Cervical Cancer Screening Test Results Mean?" Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 21 Aug. 2023, www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/basic_info/test-results.htm.

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