

# FAQs ABOUT HPV AND CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING

## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PAPER AND HPV TESTS?

With a Pap test, a clinician uses a small brush to get a sample of cells from your cervix (the cervix is the opening to the uterus or womb). The cells are looked at very closely under a microscope to see if any abnormal changes are present. A Pap test is usually part of a pelvic exam, the healthcare provider looks at and feels the organs around your cervix to make sure their shape and size is normal.

Unlike Pap tests, which look only for precancerous cervical cell changes, an HPV test can detect "high-risk" types of the human papillomavirus (HPV). For women 30 and older, HPV tests can be done along with a Pap test (sometimes the same sample that's taken with the Pap test is used). This can be enormously helpful to healthcare providers in determining which women are at greatest risk for cervical cancer, and the type of follow up care they need.



## WHY IS CO-TESTING RECOMMENDED FOR WOMEN 30 AND OLDER?

In women 30 and over, screening using both an HPV test and a Pap test is the recommended approach. If both tests are negative (normal), a woman may safely have her next Pap and HPV test in five years depending on her past Pap test findings and other risk factors. For this reason, some women now may have an HPV test when they have their Pap test. It will still be important to continue having routine recommended preventative health exams.

## WHAT ARE THE CURRENT GUIDELINES FOR SCREENING FOR CERVICAL CANCER?

The most recent guidelines from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force were released in August 2018. It is recommended that women start screening with the Pap test at age 21. (Screening is not recommended for women under age 21.) Starting at age 30, women have three options available for screening:

- A Pap test alone every three years
- Co-testing with a Pap and HPV test, every five years
- An HPV test alone, every five years

The guidelines for women aged 21-65 are general recommendations. Some women, such as women with a history of precancerous lesions or cervical cancer, may need to be screened more often. Women should always consult their healthcare provider with questions about screening.

## CAN AN HPV TEST TELL HOW LONG I MIGHT HAVE HAD THE VIRUS, OR IF I CAN GIVE IT TO A NEW PARTNER?

No. HPV tests are valuable in screening for cervical cancer, but can't tell you how long you may have had the virus or if you are able to transmit HPV to a new partner. The newer test can tell you which "high-risk" type you may have contracted. Fortunately, most HPV infections are cleared naturally by the body in a few months and are not dangerous. Regular screening is important, though, for those cases where HPV doesn't go away on its own.



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### **WHY DO GUIDELINES RECOMMEND WOMEN WAIT UNTIL AGE 21 TO HAVE THEIR FIRST PAP TEST?**

Experts traditionally called for Pap testing to begin within three years after first intercourse. Given that many girls become sexually active by the time they're in high school, many were beginning Pap tests as teenagers. Cervical cancer usually develops slowly, though, taking many years to develop in many cases. HPV, and cell changes related to the virus, usually clear naturally in young women in their teens and 20s. Since HPV is rarely a threat to their health, there is concern Pap testing women in this age range may lead to needless diagnostic procedures (such as biopsies) and treatment (such as LEEP) that can do harm to the cervix.

### **SHOULD I HAVE MY TEEN-AGE DAUGHTER TESTED FOR THE HPV VIRUS BEFORE SHE RECEIVES THE HPV VACCINE?**

Vaccinating adolescents against HPV now is an excellent idea. However, HPV testing isn't helpful or recommended for preventing cervical diseases in girls this young, and knowing one's HPV status at any age is not necessary before receiving an HPV vaccine. Girls who have HPV and receive the vaccine are still likely to benefit by being protected against other HPV types to which they may not have been exposed.

### **The CDC recommends all boys and girls get HPV vaccine at age 11 or 12.**

The vaccine produces a stronger immune response when taken during the preteen years. For this reason, up until age 14, only two doses of the vaccine are required. Young women and men can get the vaccine up to age 26, but for those 15 and older, a full three-dose series is needed.

### **IF HPV IS THE KNOWN CAUSE OF CERVICAL CANCER, SHOULDN'T ALL WOMEN SHOULD HAVE AN HPV TEST?**

The key is for women to have regular screening for cervical cancer, regardless of whether a healthcare provider uses a Pap test alone or in combination with an HPV test. While regular Pap testing alone remains a viable means of screening a woman for cervical cancer, the Pap/HPV test combo is a tool that can be very helpful in figuring out which women are at greatest risk for the disease.

HPV testing for women 30 and older makes sense because they are more likely to have HPV infections that don't resolve quickly (due to aging immune system), therefore increasing their risk for cervical cancer.

Don't worry about which option is the best one for you: the exact test or tests used is not as important as simply being screened regularly! Your healthcare provider will help you sort out which option is right for you.



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