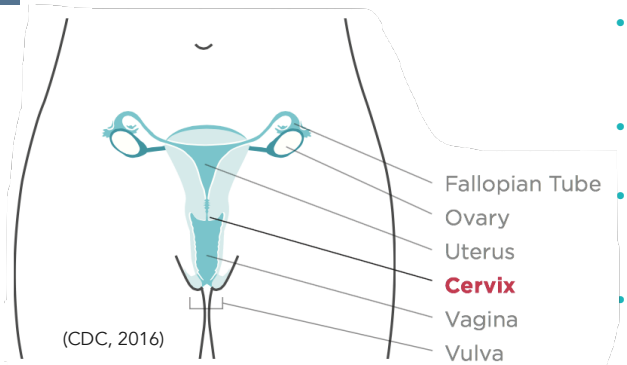
Prevent Cervical Cancer: Everything You Need to Know About Pap Tests

Cervical Cancer Awareness Month
JANUARY

The Pap test (or pap smear) is a safe, reliable and effective screening test for cervical cancer. Women should begin regular Pap tests at the age of 21. Here is some important information about Pap tests, cervical cancer, and the human papillomavirus.

What is a Pap test?

The pap test is a "microscopic analysis of cells" that can "detect cervical cancer, precancerous changes, inflammation (called vaginitis), infections, and some sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)" (DeMoranville, 2013).



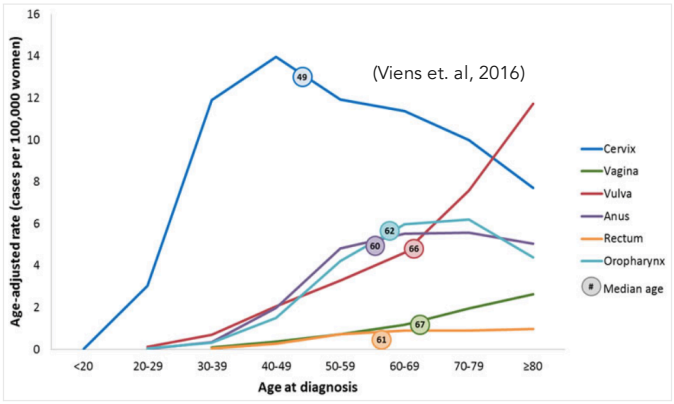
Why do I need a Pap test?

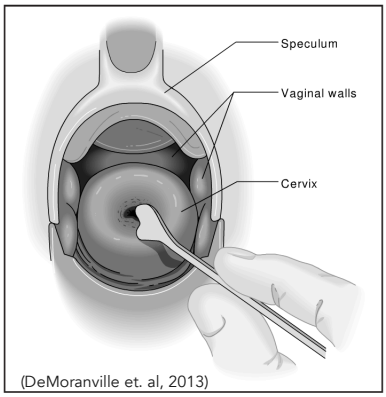
- According to the CDC, "all women are at risk for cervical cancer" (CDC, 2016). Screening tests are important in detecting abnormal cells before they become cancerous. Cervical cancer is highly curable when treated in its early stages.
- The Pap test is a cost-effective and useful test able to detect about 95% of cervical cancer (DeMoranville et. al, 2013).
- The Pap test is designed **only** to detect cervical cancer, however in some instances it can identify uterine or ovarian cancer (DeMoranville, 2013).
- Women at high risk for cervical cancer are "those who started having sex before age 18; those with many sex partners (especially if they did not use condoms); those who have had STDs such as genital herpes or genital warts; and those who smoke" (DeMoranville, 2013).

Quick Facts

- Most recent data reports that in 2013 11,955 women in the U.S. were diagnosed with cervical cancer (CDC, 2016).
- 4,217 women in the United States died from cervical cancer in 2013 (CDC, 2016).
- From 2003 to 2012, the incidence of cervical cancer in the U.S. has significantly declined by 1.3% per year (CDC, 2016).
- 6 out of 10 instances of cervical cancer occur in women who have never had a pap test or haven't had a pap test in the past five years (CDC, 2016).
- 49 years is the median age of diagnosis for cervical cancer (CDC, 2016).
- Cervical cancer is caused most commonly by HPV, or the human papillomavirus. HPV is a virus transmitted through sexual contact (CDC, 2016).

Rates of HPV-Associated Cancers and Median Age at Diagnosis Among Women in the United States, 2008–2012





How does a Pap test work?

During the Pap test, the doctor will insert an instrument called a *speculum* into the vagina to open. This allows the doctor to widen your vagina for examination of the vagina and cervix. The cervix is the "lower, narrow end of the uterus (womb) that connects the uterus to the vagina (CDC, 2016). The doctor will then use an instrument called a spatula to collect a cells and mucus from the cervix and the area that surrounds it. This sample is then sent to a laboratory for examination. Although some women find the Pap tests to be uncomfortable, the process is typically painless and usually lasts only 5 to 10 minutes (DeMoranville, 2013).

Healthy cervical cells under a microscope.

How often do I need to get a Pap test?

- Women ages 21 to 29 should have a Pap test every 3 years (testing should not be done every year) (University of Michigan, 2016).
- For women ages 30 to 64, most experts recommend Pap and HPV tests every 5 years (as long as your results are normal). You could alternatively opt to have a Pap test (without an HPV test) every 3 years (University of Michigan, 2016).
- For women ages 65 and older, most experts say screening is no longer necessary if you've had 3 consecutive Pap tests with normal results (University of Michigan, 2016).
- At any age if test results are abnormal you may need to be tested more often.

How can I get a pap test?

- A Pap test can be done in a doctor's office or clinic.
- University of Michigan's Health Services offer routine women's health exams. Information can be found at https://uhs.umich.edu/womensexam, or by calling 734.764.8320
- If you have a low income or do not have insurance, you may be able to get a free or low-cost Pap test through the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program. Search for screening providers near you: https://nccd.cdc.gov/dcpc_Programs/index.aspx#/1.