

Pap smear

Definition

A Pap smear is an examination under the microscope of cells scraped from the cervix.

Alternative Names

Papanicolaou test

Why the Test is Performed

The Pap smear can detect cancerous or precancerous conditions of the cervix. It should be done on a regular basis (see physical exam frequency for how often Pap smears should be performed).

How the Test is Performed

The Pap smear is done as part of a gynecological exam. You will lie on a table and place your feet in stirrups to position your pelvis for examination. The health care provider will insert an instrument (speculum) into your vagina and open it slightly to see inside the vaginal canal.

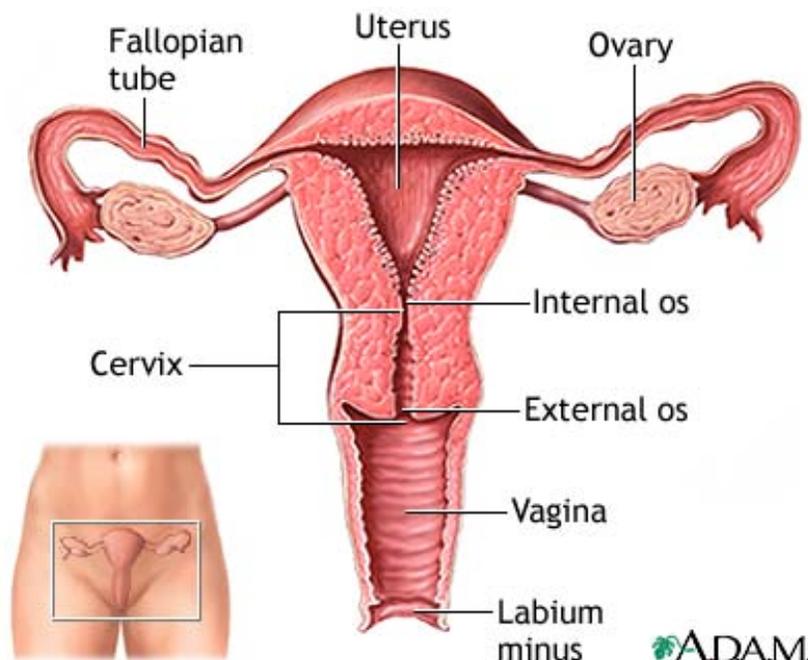
The health care provider will take a sample of cells from the outside and the canal of the cervix by gently scraping the outside of the cervix with a wooden or plastic spatula, then inserting a small brush that looks like a pipe cleaner into the canal.

The cells are placed on a glass slide, or put in a bottle containing a preservative, and then sent to the lab for examination.

How to Prepare for the Test

Tell your health care provider if you:

- Are taking any medications or birth control pills
- Have had an abnormal Pap smear
- Might be pregnant

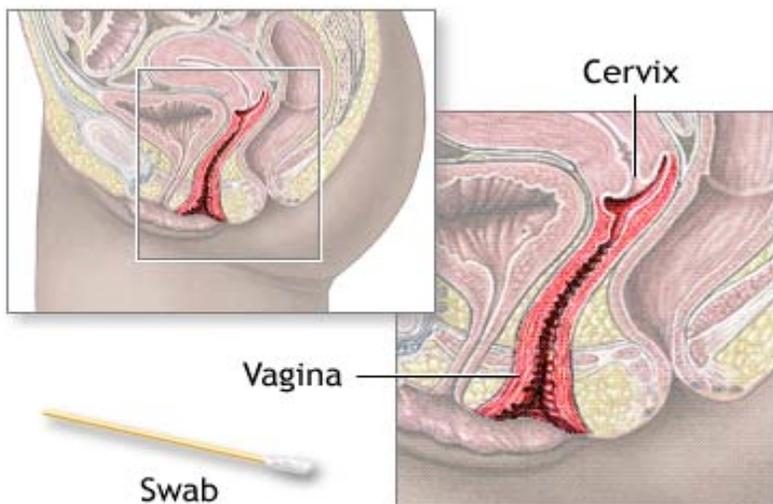


ADAM.

Pap smear

Within 24 hours of the test, avoid:

- Douching
- Having intercourse
- Taking a tub bath
- Using tampons



ADAM.

Avoid scheduling your Pap smear while you have your period (are menstruating), because blood and cells from the uterus may affect the accuracy of the Pap smear. Empty your bladder just before the test.

How the Test Will Feel

You may have some discomfort, similar to menstrual cramps, and a feeling of pressure during the procedure. You may bleed a little bit after the test.

Risks

There are no risks involved.

Considerations

The following drugs may affect Pap smears:

- Colchicine
- Compounds in cigarettes
- Estrogen
- Podophyllin
- Progestins
- Silver nitrate

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Normal Results

A normal value is negative, meaning there are no abnormal cells present.

What Abnormal Results Mean

The Pap smear is a screening test. Abnormal values are based on the test results. The current system divides the results into three main areas:

- Noncancerous (benign)
- Showing some abnormal cell changes (precancerous)
- Possibly cancerous (malignant)

When a Pap smear finds many abnormalities, a colposcopy-directed biopsy is usually done. When a positive Pap smear shows minor cell changes or abnormalities, a biopsy probably will not be done right away, unless there is a reason to believe you may be in a high-risk category.

For minor cell changes, doctors usually recommend having a repeat Pap smear in 6 months