



The Lebanese Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology

Women's health promotion series

The Pap Smear Test

Since the Pap smear test started to be used the number of cases of cervical cancer was greatly reduced. The Pap test is used to find changes in the cells of the *cervix* (the lower part of the uterus that opens into the vagina) (see picture 1) that could lead to cancer. Most women should have Pap tests on a regular basis.



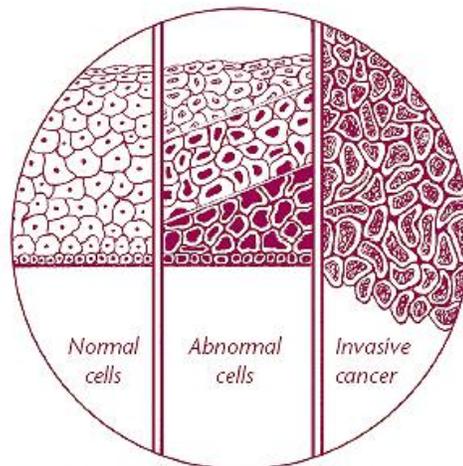
Picture 1

This pamphlet explains

- what the Pap test checks for and how it is done
- who should have a Pap test and how often it should be done
- what happens if the result is abnormal
- accuracy of Pap test results

What Is a Pap Test?

The cervix is covered by a thin layer of tissue. This tissue is made up of cells. As these cells develop, the cells at the bottom layer slowly move to the surface of the cervix. During this process, some cells may become abnormal or damaged. Abnormal cells on the cervix may lead to cancer. (see picture 2)



This enlarged view of cervical cells shows how abnormal cells can become cancer. This process often takes many years.

Picture 2

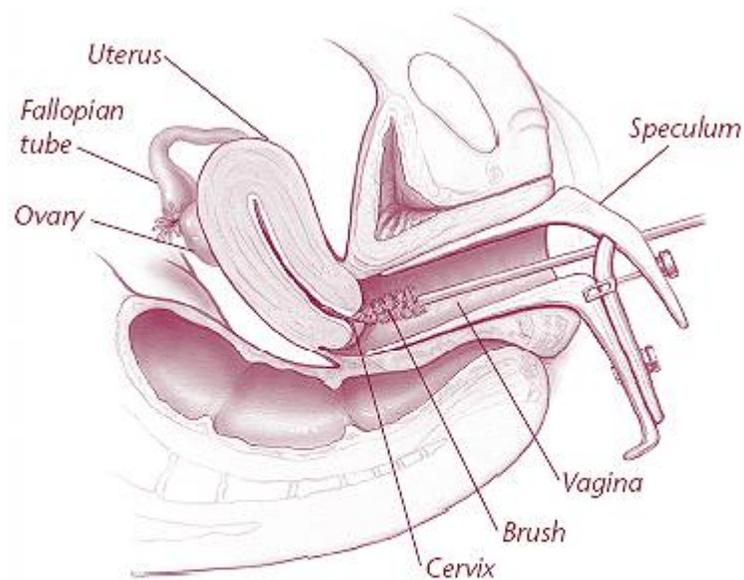
The Pap test, sometimes called a Pap smear, is a simple test that can detect abnormal cervical cells. It is not the same as a *pelvic exam* (a manual examination of a woman's reproductive organs). The Pap test allows early diagnosis and treatment so that the abnormal cells do not become cancer. Routine Pap tests help decrease the chance that abnormal cells are not noticed. If a Pap test does not show that there are abnormal cells this time, they may be found on your next Pap test.

The main cause of cervical cancer is a virus called *human papilloma virus (HPV)* (viruses that can cause genital warts, cervical changes and cervical cancer). HPV is passed from person to person during sexual activity. Usually, a woman's *immune system* (The body's natural defense system against foreign substances) clears the virus quickly, and the infection goes away by itself. But in some women, HPV persists and causes changes in cervical cells. Cells infected with HPV look abnormal under a microscope and can be found through the Pap test. Most of the time, these changes go away on their own without treatment.

How the Pap Test is Done

A Pap test is simple and fast. It takes less than a minute to do. With the woman lying on an exam table, a *speculum* (An instrument used to hold open the walls of the vagina) is used to open the vagina(see picture 3). This device gives a clear view of the cervix.

A small number of cells are removed from the cervix with a brush or other tool. The cells are put into a liquid and sent to a lab. At the lab, the sample is examined using a microscope to see if abnormal cells are present.



For the Pap test, a speculum is placed into the vagina. A small sample of cells is removed with a small brush or swab and a spatula. The sample is sent to a lab for testing.

Picture 3

Who Should Have a Pap Test and How Often

Regular Pap tests are an important part of all women's health care. You should start having Pap tests at age 21 years. How often you should have a Pap test depends on your age and health history:

- Women younger than 30 years should have a Pap test every 2 years.
- Women aged 30 years and older should have a Pap test every 2 years.

- After three normal Pap test results in a row, a woman aged 30 years and older may have Pap tests every 3 years if:
 - she does not have a history of moderate or severe **dysplasia** (A noncancerous condition that occurs when normal cells are replaced by a layer of abnormal cells)
 - she is not infected with **human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)** (A virus that attacks certain cells of the body's immune system and causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS))
 - her immune system is not weakened (for example, if she has had an organ transplant)

It is important to discuss your own situation with your health care provider. You should still see your health care provider every year for well-woman care and any reproductive health care or information.

It is not clear when a woman can stop having Pap tests. Some experts recommend that a woman who is aged 65 years or 70 years can stop having Pap tests after three normal results in a row within the past 10 years. However, if you have certain risk factors, you should continue to have routine Pap tests.

These risk factors include:

- Being sexually active
- Having had multiple partners
- Having had a previous history of abnormal Pap test results.

If you have had a **hysterectomy** (removal of the uterus), talk to your doctor about whether you still need routine Pap tests.

Whether you need to continue having Pap tests depends on:

- Why your hysterectomy was needed
- Whether your cervix was removed
- Whether you have a history of moderate or severe dysplasia.

What Happens if the Result is Abnormal?

Many women have abnormal Pap test results. An abnormal result does not mean that you have cancer. It only means that abnormal cells have been found. It often takes years before abnormal cells can become cancer. Cells that are mildly abnormal may go away on their own.

Your physician might ask for additional testing after an abnormal Pap test result. This testing can be simply a repeat Pap test in 6 months or 12 months, an HPV test, or a more detailed examination called a *colposcopy* (Viewing of the cervix, vulva, or vagina with an instrument called a colposcope) with or without a *biopsy* (a surgical procedure to remove a small piece of tissue that is then examined in a laboratory).

If results of follow-up tests indicate changes that might become cancerous, you may need treatment to remove the abnormal cells.

Whether you need treatment depends on many factors:

- Your age
- The type of abnormal result (mild, moderate, or severe dysplasia)
- How long the abnormal cells have been present

There are several techniques that are used to remove abnormal cells. Your health care provider will discuss with you which one is right for your specific situation. You will need follow-up testing after treatment and will need to get regular Pap tests after the follow-up is complete.

Is the Pap Test Always Accurate?

As with any lab test, Pap test results are not always accurate. Sometimes, the results show abnormal cells when the cells are normal. A Pap test also may not detect abnormal cells when they are present. Many factors can cause false results:

- The sample may contain too few cells.
- There may not be enough abnormal cells to study.
- An infection or blood may hide abnormal cells.

- **Douching** (washing the inside of the vagina) or vaginal medications may remove abnormal cells.

Your doctor may suggest a repeat Pap test to check the results. A repeat test increases the likelihood that abnormal cells, if present, will be detected.

Finally...

The Pap test finds cell changes that may lead to cancer of the cervix. Routine Pap tests can help find problems early. If a Pap test finds abnormal cells, your doctor will suggest further tests or treatment.

With the compliments of the Lebanese Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology

(Women's health promotion)