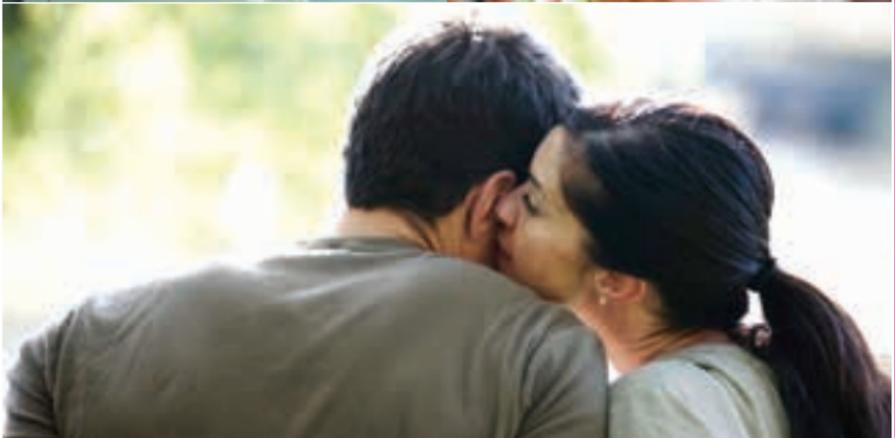




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A Pap Test Could Save Your Life



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A Pap Test Could Save Your Life

21 or older and sexually active? Get a Pap test!

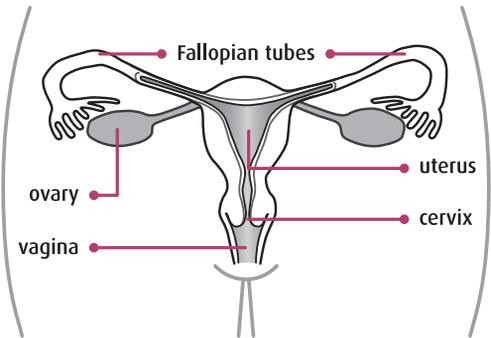
If you knew that a Pap test, which takes 5 minutes, could save your life or save you from getting cancer, you'd have the test, right? If you've ever been sexually active, you should start having regular Pap tests (also called Pap smears) by the time you're 21 – it's the best way to protect yourself from cervical cancer. Even if you've had the vaccine, and you feel fine, this simple screening test could save your life by finding changes in your cervix before they develop into cancer.

In this brochure, some women will share with you just how important the Pap test was to them. You'll find out who should have a Pap test and other steps you can take to reduce your risk.

“ *I had no symptoms. I had no family history. I didn't fit the high-risk profile. Looking back, having regular Pap tests was my saving grace.* ~ Sarah

What is cervical cancer?

Like all cancers, cervical cancer is named after the tissue where the cancerous cells start – in this case, the cervix. The cervix is the passageway that connects the uterus (or womb) to the vagina.



Cervical cancer is generally a slow-growing cancer that develops after the cells of the cervix start to change and become abnormal. These precancerous changes – which are not cancer – are called *dysplasia* of the cervix. Dysplasia is a condition that can turn into cancer if it isn't monitored and treated.

The main cause of cervical cancer

The biggest risk factor for developing cervical cancer is infection of the cervix with human papillomavirus (HPV). HPVs are a group of viruses that live on the skin and can be passed from person to person through any kind of sexual touching.

If you're sexually active, you've likely been exposed to HPV at some time. HPV infections are quite common and most go away on their own. But some don't. These are the infections that can lead to cancer if they aren't caught through Pap tests and treated early.

“ *You hear about HPV and you figure, oh well, I haven't had that many partners. If you were with one partner who had HPV and he gave it to you ... that's all it takes.* ~ Shannon

Who's at risk?

Any woman can get cervical cancer – no matter what her age, background or sexual orientation – but you're at a higher risk for cervical cancer if you:

- don't have regular Pap tests
- became sexually active at a young age
- have had many sexual partners or a sexual partner who has had many partners
- smoke
- have used birth control pills for a long time (usually more than 10 years)

“ *As a queer woman, I was told that my risk was low and that I didn't need to have regular Pap smears. Given that I was eventually diagnosed with cervical cancer, this info was clearly false. If you have a cervix and you've had sex, you need regular Pap tests.* ~ Layla

Other risk factors

These risk factors don't apply to most women, but your risk of cervical cancer is also higher if you:

- have been exposed to a drug called diethylstilbestrol (DES), either by taking it yourself or if your mother took it while she was pregnant with you. DES was prescribed to women between 1940 and 1971 to prevent miscarriage, premature labour and other complications in pregnancy
- have a weakened immune system (for example, because you take drugs to prevent organ rejection after a transplant, or you have a disease like AIDS)
- have given birth to 7 or more children

A 5-minute test could save your life

“ *There are so many things that can be so much worse than that 5-minute exam. Try 6 weeks of radiation and chemotherapy.* ~ Shannon

A Pap test is a quick and simple test that can be done in your doctor's office or at a public health clinic. It involves getting a sample of cells from the cervix and then looking at them under a microscope for abnormalities. To get the cells, your doctor needs to make your cervix visible by inserting a speculum (a plastic or metal medical tool) into your vagina. The doctor will then use a small wooden stick or spatula to gently scrape the surface of the lower part of the cervix to pick up cells. A special brush gets cells from the upper part of the cervix.

“ *It's not a happy thing or a fun thing, but it is a necessary thing. I'd urge any woman to have regular Pap tests and to take control of her health.* ~ Sarah

If you're sexually active, you should start having regular Pap tests by the time you're 21. You'll need a Pap test every 1 to 3 years, depending on your previous test results. It's important to have the test even if you feel fine – it's a *screening* test, which means it checks for signs of disease before you've noticed anything that might be a problem.

“ *Don't judge the health of your cervix on how you look and feel – get a Pap test regularly!* ~ Layla

What does “sexually active” mean?

Being sexually active means more than having intercourse with someone. It can mean:

- any genital skin-to-skin contact
- having oral sex
- having intercourse

If you're older than 21 and you've been sexually active for a while but have never had a Pap test, it's not too late to start. It's also not too late if you've skipped the test for a number of years. Schedule a test as soon as you can. Even if you've stopped having sex, you should still continue to have regular Pap tests.

If you've had a hysterectomy (the surgical removal of all or part of your uterus), talk to your doctor about whether or not you still need to have Pap tests.

Do I still need a Pap test if ...

I'm in a same-sex relationship? YES

I've had sex in the past, but not recently? YES

I haven't had any new sexual partners recently? YES

I've had the same sexual partner for years? YES

I haven't had intercourse, but I've been sexually active in other ways? YES

I'm feeling perfectly healthy? YES

I've had an HPV vaccine? YES

I've already gone through menopause? YES

A note about pelvic exams

A Pap test is often followed by a pelvic exam to check for problems other than cervical cancer. Your doctor will insert a gloved finger into the vagina to check the pelvic organs (uterus, ovaries and Fallopian tubes) while pressing gently on your lower abdomen with the other hand. It's normal to feel some pressure, but there shouldn't be pain.

Pap test do's and don'ts

Follow these do's and don'ts to make sure you get the best possible sample of cells for examination under the microscope:

Do try to have the Pap test in the middle part of your menstrual cycle – that means between 10 and 20 days after the first day of your period.

Don't use vaginal douches, vaginal medications, contraceptive (spermicidal) creams, foams or jellies (unless your doctor tells you to) in the 48 hours before the test.

Don't have intercourse in the 24 hours before the test.

Waiting for results

Ask when (or if) you can expect to hear back about your test. Some offices tell you the results no matter what they are, while others call or let you know only if there's a problem. If you do hear that your results are abnormal, don't panic. It doesn't mean that you have cancer, and in most cases abnormal cells are easily treated. Your doctor may monitor you to see if the cells change back to normal cells

on their own. Or you may be sent for follow-up tests, such as another Pap test, an HPV test or a biopsy.

You may have some light bleeding (spotting) for a day or two after your test. This is normal.

Other ways to reduce your risk

Limit your exposure to HPV

Because HPV is spread through direct sexual contact, the only way to completely avoid it is to avoid being sexually active – not a realistic choice for most women! You can limit your exposure to HPV by:

- using condoms
- having as few sexual partners as possible
- being in a monogamous relationship with someone who's also had as few sexual partners as possible

Get vaccinated against HPV

Two vaccines that protect against HPV are available in Canada. These vaccines can help reduce the risk of cervical cancer, as well as vulvar, vaginal and anal cancer. Talk to your doctor about which vaccine is right for you and when you should have it.

Both vaccines are very effective in preventing infection in girls (age 9 and older) who haven't already been exposed to HPV. But they can also help protect women who are already sexually active and can be given until the age of 45.

Vaccination is no guarantee!

Getting vaccinated does not protect you from every possible type of HPV infection that could lead to cervical cancer. Even if you have the vaccine, keep having regular Pap tests.

Don't smoke

Smoking and exposure to second-hand smoke have both been linked to dysplasia and cervical cancer. If you smoke, reducing your risk of cervical cancer is another reason to quit.

Report any changes to your doctor

Even if you have Pap tests regularly, it's important to know what's normal for your body and to see your doctor if you notice any changes.

“ *If you think something's wrong, go get it checked. Just go. You know your body better than anyone else.* ~ Shannon

See your doctor if you have:

- abnormal bleeding from the vagina (including spotting between periods, bleeding after sex, heavier than usual menstrual flow or bleeding after menopause)
- more vaginal discharge than normal
- pain in your pelvis or lower back
- pain during sexual intercourse

Find out more

Cervical cancer *can* be prevented. Contact us for the most up-to-date information on Pap test screening, vaccines and other ways to reduce your risk of cervical cancer:

- Call us toll-free Monday to Friday at 1-888-939-3333 (TTY 1-866 786-3934). If you need help in another language, interpreters are available.
- Email info@cis.cancer.ca.
- Visit cancer.ca.
- Contact your local Canadian Cancer Society office.

Our services are free and confidential.

We'd like to hear from you

Email us at publicationsfeedback@cancer.ca if you have comments or suggestions to help us make this brochure more useful for you and other readers.

What we do

The Canadian Cancer Society fights cancer by:

- doing everything we can to prevent cancer
- funding research to outsmart cancer
- empowering, informing and supporting Canadians living with cancer
- advocating for public policies to improve the health of Canadians
- rallying Canadians to get involved in the fight against cancer

Contact us for up-to-date information about cancer and our services or to make a donation.



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PREVENTING CANCER



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