Pap Tests:
When you need them - and when you don't

Choosing Wisely Canada™

A Pap test is a test of cells of the cervix. The cervix is the opening between the vagina and the uterus. The Pap test looks for cells that are not normal and can cause cervical cancer.

You may receive a regular pap test if you are between the ages of 21 to 69 - but it may not always be necessary. Here's why:

Pap tests usually don't help if you are low-risk.

Many people have a very low risk for cervical cancer.

- Cervical cancer is rare if you are younger than 21, even if you are sexually active. Abnormal cells in this age group usually return to normal without treatment.
- Cervical cancer is rare if you are over 69 and have had regular Pap tests with normal results.
- Pap tests are not useful for anyone who has had their cervix removed during a hysterectomy, unless the hysterectomy was done because there were cancer or pre-cancer cells in the cervix.

Pap tests can have risks.

A Pap test can be uncomfortable and cause a little bleeding.

The test may show something that does not look normal but would go away on its own. Abnormal results cause anxiety. And they can lead to repeat Pap tests and follow-up treatment that you may not need.

So, when do I need a Pap test?

That depends on your age, your medical history, and your risks.

- Ages 21 to 29: Most provincial and territorial guidelines recommend that if you are at least 21 years of age and are sexually active you should have a Pap test every three years.
- Ages 30 to 69: The guidelines from the Canadian Task Force on Preventive Health Care and others say that you should have the Pap test every three years.
- Age 70 or older: You do not need any more Pap tests if your three previous tests have been normal.

About Choosing Wisely Canada

Choosing Wisely Canada is the national voice for reducing unnecessary tests and treatments in health care. One of its important functions is to help clinicians and patients engage in conversations that lead to smart and effective care choices.

How this pamphlet was created:

This pamphlet was adapted with permission from a similar pamphlet used in the US Choosing Wisely campaign, organized by the ABIM Foundation. Modifications were made to ensure relevance for a Canadian audience. Canadian reviewers of this pamphlet included the College of Family Physicians of Canada.

This pamphlet is for you to use when talking with your health care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this pamphlet is at your own risk.

How can you protect yourself against cervical cancer?

The best way to protect yourself against cervical cancer is to protect yourself against human papilloma virus (HPV). HPV is a sexually transmitted infection that can cause cervical cancer.

Get the HPV vaccine.

- The HPV vaccine is recommended for people before becoming sexually active, usually around age 11 or 12.
- If you have not been vaccinated and are sexually active, speak with your health care provider about the vaccine.
- You will still need regular Pap tests because the vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV that can cause cancer.

Reduce your risk.

- Use condoms. Condoms help reduce the risk of getting HPV. You are less likely to be infected and to infect partners. However, condoms do not prevent all infections.
- Use spermicidal gels. They also help protect against HPV.
- If you feel you are at risk for a sexually transmitted infection, you should visit your health care provider for testing and an examination.

Don't smoke. The risk of developing cervical cancer increases with the length of time if you smoke and the number of cigarettes smoke per day.

Take these steps to make your Pap test as accurate as possible.

- Make your appointment for at least five days after your menstrual period stops.
- For 48 hours before the test: Do not have sex, and do not use douches, tampons, birth control foams or gels, vaginal creams, moisturizers or lubricants, or vaginal medicines.