

# Pap Smears

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## **What is a Pap smear?**

A Pap smear is a simple test used to detect early changes in the cells of the cervix (the lower end of the womb or uterus). Without treatment, these changes can lead to cancer.

Regular Pap smears help detect early warning signs of cervical cancer and allow women to receive treatment before the cancer develops. Many cases of cervical cancer could have been prevented through regular Pap smears.

It is important to remember that a Pap smear only tests for changes to the cervix. It is possible, however, to be tested for some sexually transmissible infections at the same time as your Pap smear - talk to your clinician for more details.

## **How is a Pap smear taken?**

No drugs or anaesthetics are used when a Pap smear is taken. An instrument called a speculum is gently inserted into the vagina so the cervix can be seen clearly. The woman herself can insert the speculum if she wishes. Cells are gently wiped from around the cervix with a small spatula onto a glass slide. After the cells are collected on the glass slide they are sent to a laboratory to be examined under a microscope for any changes or abnormalities.

While some women find Pap smears mildly uncomfortable, they are rarely painful and usually only take a few minutes. If it is your first time having a Pap smear it is natural to feel a little nervous. Discuss any concerns you have with your clinician.

## **Who needs a Pap smear?**

One of the main causes of cervical cancer is the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), which is passed on through sexual activity. All women who are sexually active should start having Pap smears two years after first having sex, and continue to have a Pap smear every two years until they turn 70. At this time your clinician may advise they are no longer necessary.

Your clinician may recommend you have more frequent Pap smears if a previous one showed significant cell changes.

Every woman needs to have regular Pap smears, regardless of her age or number of sexual partners. Women who no longer have periods or haven't had sex for a long time still need to have a Pap smear every two years.

While many lesbians think they don't need to have a Pap smear as they don't have sex with men, they or their partner may have had sex with men in the past, meaning they may have been exposed to HPV and therefore need to have regular Pap smears.

A free cervical cancer vaccine is available for young women – talk to a doctor or FPWA clinician for more details. It is important that women who are vaccinated continue to have regular Pap smears however, as the vaccine only protects against certain types of HPV.

## **When is the best time to have a Pap smear?**

A Pap smear can only be performed when you are not having a period, with the ideal time being a week or so after you have stopped bleeding. Any time is suitable if you no longer have periods.

## **How long till I get the results?**

The results of a Pap smear usually take around one week to come back from the laboratory. Most clinics routinely send a letter informing you of the result. If the clinic doesn't send a letter, make sure you contact the clinician who took your Pap smear to get your results so that any changes can be followed up.

### **What if my results are abnormal?**

An abnormal Pap smear result very rarely means you have cancer, and the majority of abnormalities found are very minor. Many of these will go away on their own without needing treatment, but it is vital women have a follow-up Pap smear to see if the condition has cleared up. If treatment is required, it usually involves using a laser to burn the abnormal cells off the cervix. This procedure only takes a few minutes, and is done under anaesthetic.

It is important that you discuss your results with a doctor and what treatment, if any, you should have.

For more information about abnormal Pap smears go to

[http://www.health.wa.gov.au/publications/cervical\\_cancer/an\\_abnormal\\_pap\\_smear.pdf](http://www.health.wa.gov.au/publications/cervical_cancer/an_abnormal_pap_smear.pdf)

### **What if I've had a hysterectomy?**

Whether you need to continue having Pap smears depends on the reason the hysterectomy was done. Check with your doctor to be sure.

### **Where can I have a Pap smear?**

You can visit a doctor, your local women's health centre or a Family Planning Clinic to have a Pap smear. Try to choose someone you feel comfortable and relaxed with.

For more information about Pap smears contact the **Sexual Health Helpline** on 9227 6178 or 1800 198 205 (country callers) or email [sexhelp@fpwa.org.au](mailto:sexhelp@fpwa.org.au)

**Practising safe sex reduces the risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs).**



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[www.fpwa.org.au](http://www.fpwa.org.au)

[info@fpwa.org.au](mailto:info@fpwa.org.au)

Sexual Health Helpline (08) 9227 6178 or 1800 198 205 (Country Callers)

[sexhelp@fpwa.org.au](mailto:sexhelp@fpwa.org.au)

Quarry Health Centre for under 25s

7 Quarry Street, PO Box 378, Fremantle, WA, 6959

ph: (08) 9430 4544 fax: (08) 9430 4544

[quarry@fpwa.org.au](mailto:quarry@fpwa.org.au)