



Frequently Asked Questions: Abnormal Pap Tests & HPV

Please review the Pap Tests and HPV pamphlets. If you are having a colposcopy, we have other articles you may find helpful.

“What is the link between HPV, abnormal Pap Tests and cervical cancer?”

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a virus that can cause abnormal changes (called *dysplasia*) to cells on the cervix (the opening of the uterus). HPV may also cause genital warts. The virus is so common that 75-90% of all people will be exposed to it at some point in their lives.

A Pap test is a simple test that can find abnormal changes to the cervix before they could turn into cancer. If your Pap test shows early abnormal cells, please be assured that this common and can be treated if needed. It is also common for abnormal changes to heal on their own without any treatment.

If early cervical changes don't heal on their own or are left untreated, they might possibly turn into cervical cancer over time. The good news is that very few in Canada will get cervical cancer because of routine cervical screening.

“I've had an abnormal Pap test result. Does that mean I'm going to get genital warts too?”

No. There are over 80 different strains of HPV. Most types will either cause genital warts or dysplasia, but rarely both. However, it is possible to be infected more than one kind of HPV at the same time. If this happens, someone may have warts and cervical changes at the same time. It's also possible to have both an abnormal Pap test and genital warts at different times in your life.

“Isn't HPV a sexually transmitted infection? Does that mean my partner has been unfaithful to me?”

Unless you both had no sexual experience (any kind of intimate touching at all) until you first became sexually active together, it's impossible to tell who had HPV first.

Dr. Phil Davis (Healthcare & Epidemiology, University of British Columbia) has said: “HPV is actually so common, it is simply considered a side-effect of being sexually active.” This assumes that all sexually active people will likely be exposed to HPV at some point in their lives. In this way, HPV is different from other types of sexually transmitted infections.

“If I have HPV, does this mean I’m going to get herpes?”

No. HPV and the herpes virus are completely different viruses.

“What factors increase my chance of having an abnormal Pap test result?”

Even women with only one or two lifetime sexual partners and no other risk factors, are likely to have an abnormal Pap test at some point. The risk of developing abnormal cervical cells (and actual cancer of the cervix) increases for people who:

- start having sex at an early age
- have many sexual partners
- smoke (it reduces the immune system’s ability to protect from HPV)
- have a positive HIV test
- have a history of sexually transmitted infections (STI’s can inflame tissue, making it more susceptible to HPV)
- were exposed to DES (*diethylstilbestrol*), a hormone given to some pregnant women from about 1940 to 1971 to prevent miscarriages. If your mother took DES while pregnant, you may have a higher risk of developing reproductive cancers.

It is possible to be exposed to HPV by male or female partners, and with or without sexual intercourse. This means that you can get HPV through intimate touching like fingers-to-genitals contact. Lesbians and transgendered people with cervixes also need to have regular Pap tests.

“If I have HPV, will it ever go away?”

Within 12-18 months, 80% of people with HPV will have undetectable levels of the virus. We are not sure if this means it’s gone for good.

“How can I help protect myself from HPV?”

Although condoms are not 100% effective, studies show they can greatly reduce HPV infection when used the first and every time someone is sexually active. You can also decrease the risk of getting HPV and other types of sexually transmitted infections by avoiding high-risk sexual activities and limiting the number of sexual partners.

“How can I reduce my risk of developing cervical cancer?”

- Have regular Pap tests. For most, this means having a Pap test every 2 years. If you recently had an abnormal result, talk to your health care provider about when you should be tested again.
- Repeat your Pap test and have a colposcopy when your health care provider recommends it.

- Continue to have regular Pap tests until you are 70 years old. Many people stop having regular Pap tests done once they are in long-term relationships or no longer need birth control. This increases the risk of developing cervical cancer.
- Be a non-smoker. Smoking is linked to abnormal cervical changes and reduces your body's natural ability to fight HPV.
- Eat well. Try to eat at least 5 servings of fresh fruit and vegetables every day. Nutrients such as beta-carotene, folic acid, vitamin A and vitamin C will boost your immune system and may also help protect against cervical dysplasia. Some experts recommend taking a multi-vitamin that contains folic acid to help fight HPV.
- Ask your health care provider if the HPV vaccine would benefit you. If you have a vaccine, **it's very important to continue to have regular Pap tests. The vaccines do not offer full protection against all the different types of HPV.**

To learn more about HPV or the HPV vaccines, please visit:

- www.tellevewoman.ca
- www.hpvinfos.ca

Disclaimer: We provide this health information for your learning only. It should not be used to replace a visit with a health care provider.

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