

## Screening for Cervical Cancer – When You Need it and When You Don't

Cervical cancer begins in a woman's cervix, which is the opening between the vagina and the uterus, or womb. Cervical cancer usually develops slowly, which means it may be prevented or detected early by regular Pap tests. If it is detected early, cervical cancer is one of the cancers that can be treated most successfully.

But cervical cancer screening isn't always necessary. Here's why.

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### Pap tests usually don't help low-risk women.

- Cervical cancer is rare in women younger than 21, even if they are sexually active. Abnormal cells in younger women usually return to normal without treatment.
- Cervical cancer is rare in women older than 65 who have had regular Pap tests with normal results.
- Pap tests are not useful for women who have had their cervix removed during a hysterectomy, unless the hysterectomy was done because there were cancer or pre-cancer cells in the cervix.

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### Pap tests can have risks.

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

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### The tests cost money.

A Pap test is done during a pelvic exam, which costs money. Add lab fees and any follow-up fees and the costs quickly increase. For women who are low risk, these costs are unnecessary.

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### When You Should Get a Pap Test

When you should have a Pap test depends on your age, medical history and risk of developing cervical cancer.

In general, women ages 21 to 30 should have a Pap test every three years. Cervical cancer usually takes 10 to 20 years to develop, so you don't need the test each year. You do not need a Pap test before age 21, even if you are sexually active.

For women ages 30 to 65, new guidelines from the American Cancer Society and others recommend the Pap test and HPV test every five years. HPV, or human papillomavirus, is a sexually transmitted infection that can cause cervical cancer.

Women older than 65 do not need additional Pap tests if their recent tests have been normal. If you have risk factors for cervical cancer, ask your doctor how often you need a Pap test. Risk factors include: pre-cancer cells in your cervix, a history of cervical cancer or a weak immune system.

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### Talk With Your Doctor

Most women ages 21 through 64 need regular Pap tests. But teenage girls and older women don't always need them. Take some time to talk with your doctor about your cervical cancer risk and determine your screening schedule so you're not getting tested unnecessarily.

Learn more about the recommendations at [www.ownyourhealthwa.org/partners/choosingwisely](http://www.ownyourhealthwa.org/partners/choosingwisely) or <https://www.wsma.org/choosing-wisely>.

Visit [www.wacommunitycheckup.org](http://www.wacommunitycheckup.org), click "compare scores," select "medical groups" or "clinics," click "health screenings" and click "screening for cervical cancer" to learn how often local doctors provide recommended cervical cancer screening.