

## UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

**YOUR PAP SMEAR: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW****WHAT IS A PAP SMEAR?**

A pap smear is a method of examining cells from the cervix. The cervix is the lower part of the uterus and is located at the end of the vagina. The cervix opens during childbirth to allow a baby to pass from the uterus into the birth canal.

A pap smear is a screening test for cervical cancer. The Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is the most important risk factor for developing cervical cancer. Sexual activity may increase your risk of exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HPV. Only the “high-risk” HPV types can cause cervical cancer in women. The “low-risk” HPV types cause genital warts in both women and men.

**WHEN DO I NEED TO START GETTING A PAP SMEAR?**

It is recommended that all women have their first pap smears at age 21, even if they have never been sexually active.

**HOW DO I PREPARE FOR A PAP SMEAR?**

If you plan to have your pap smear done at Student Health, call ahead to set up an appointment, stating clearly that you are scheduling a pap smear.

Do not douche, use tampons, have sex, or put anything (including medications) in the vagina for 24-48 hours before your pap smear.

**WHAT HAPPENS DURING A PAP SMEAR?**

A pap smear is a procedure that samples cells from your cervix with a brush. Two samples are taken, one from the outside of the cervix and the other from the canal that leads into the uterus. This procedure does not hurt, but you may feel pressure during the exam. You may also experience slight menstrual cramping and a small amount of spotting afterwards.

It takes approximately two weeks to receive the pap smear results. A pap smear is considered normal if no changes concerning for pre-cancer or cancer are identified. Sometimes a pap smear will incidentally identify other vaginal infections (like yeast or trichomonas), even though it was not designed for this purpose.

**WHAT ARE COMMON RISK FACTORS FOR CERVICAL CANCER?**

- ❖ Sex prior to age 18.
- ❖ Multiple sexual partners.
- ❖ High-risk sexual partner (eg. someone with multiple partners or known HPV).
- ❖ Sexually transmitted infections.
- ❖ Immunodeficiency (eg. HIV).
- ❖ Cigarette smoking.
- ❖ Having given birth to three or more children.

**WHAT IS AN ABNORMAL PAP SMEAR?**

If you receive a call from Student Health stating that your pap smear results are abnormal, don't panic! Most abnormal pap smears are not cancer. About one in every 20 pap smears is considered abnormal.

If you have an abnormal pap, make a follow-up appointment to see us. We will review your pap smear results with you, discuss whether further evaluation is needed, and answer questions you may have. Write down your questions ahead of time, so you won't forget them when you come in.

**The most common causes of abnormal pap smears are described below:**

- **Unsatisfactory for evaluation.** This is NOT considered an abnormal result. It simply means that insufficient cells were obtained during testing.
  - ❖ If the cause is an infection, we will treat the underlying infection and repeat the pap smear after treatment.
  - ❖ If the cause is insufficient sampling of the cells, a second pap smear will be repeated no sooner than two months after the previous pap smear.

■ **Atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance (ASCUS)**. This means that the cervix has cells that are slightly atypical in appearance. These changes are probably due to the presence of HPV. Most young women will clear HPV infections within one year without any intervention.

- ❖ If you are 21-24 years of age and have ASCUS with a
  - Positive HPV test, you will need a repeat pap smear in one year.
  - Negative HPV test, you can repeat your pap smear in 3 years.
- ❖ If you are over 24 years of age and have ASCUS with a
  - Positive HPV test, you will be referred to a specialist for a procedure called a colposcopy.
  - Negative HPV test, you can repeat your pap smear in 3 years.

■ **Low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion (LSIL)**. This means that mildly abnormal changes were seen in the cells of the cervix. Low-grade changes found on pap smears often resolve on their own without treatment.

- ❖ If you are 21-24 years of age and have LSIL, you will need a repeat pap smear in one year.
- ❖ If you are older than 24 years of age, you will be referred for a colposcopy.

■ **High-grade squamous intraepithelial lesions (HSIL)**. This means that abnormal changes seen in the cells of the cervix are moderate to severe.

- ❖ High-grade lesions require treatment because they are unlikely to resolve on their own. If left untreated, it is possible that these changes will lead to cervical cancer.
- ❖ Although progression to cancer requires persistent HPV infection for many years, it is important to follow up with a gynecologist for colposcopy and treatment as soon as possible.

■ The vast majority of abnormal pap smears show only mild cellular changes. Most young women will clear HPV infections within 8 to 24 months without treatment. However, it is still important to follow up on all abnormal pap smears due to the risk of developing cervical cancer, which can be fatal.

### **WHAT IS A COLPOSCOPY? (COL-POS-COPY)**

A colposcope is an instrument that enables a specialist to see your cervix more clearly. The procedure is similar to getting a pap smear, except the practitioner will swab your cervix with a vinegar solution to outline any abnormal tissue. Biopsies will be taken of any abnormalities, and results are usually available in two to three weeks. Depending on the results, your specialist may recommend further treatment.

The colposcopy procedure may cause some mild discomfort, similar to menstrual cramps. Afterwards, you may engage in your normal activities. However, you should not insert anything into your vagina for at least the next four days or until any bleeding has stopped.

### **HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF?**

■ Use condoms every time you have sex to decrease your exposure to HPV and other STIs. Condoms are not *totally* protective because HPV infection can occur in genital areas not covered by the condom. However, condom use has been associated with a lower rate of cervical cancer.

■ Limit your number of sexual partners.

■ Strongly consider getting **Gardasil or Cervarix**, the two vaccines approved by the FDA for the prevention of HPV infections.

- ❖ Both vaccines protect against two HPV types that cause 70% of cervical cancers and 50% of precancerous lesions.
- ❖ Gardasil also protects against two HPV types that cause 90% of genital warts.
- ❖ Both vaccines are approved for use in females ages 9-26. In 2009, the FDA approved the use of Gardasil for prevention of genital warts in males ages 9-26.
- ❖ Both vaccines are given in three doses over six months.
- ❖ Even if you have already been diagnosed with HPV, these vaccines can still protect against other HPV types to which your body has not yet been exposed.

■ Remember to get a pap smear on a regular basis.

■ If you smoke, strongly consider quitting because cigarette smoking can increase the risk of cervical cancer up to four-fold.

### **RECOMMENDED WEBSITES:**

- [www.asccp.org](http://www.asccp.org)
- [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
- [www.nlm.nih.gov/medline\\_plus/health\\_topics](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medline_plus/health_topics)