



Abnormal Pap Tests

What is a Pap Test?

A Pap test (also known as a Pap smear) is a screening test to locate pre-cancerous abnormalities in the cervix.

What Does an Abnormal Pap Test Mean?

After cells or tissues are collected from the cervix (the narrow opening to the uterus at the end of the vagina) during a Pap test or biopsy, a pathologist examines the sample to identify any changes or abnormalities. An abnormal Pap test means that there have been some changes to the cells lining the cervix. Healthy cervical cells are thin and flat. If your test results are abnormal, it is because your sample contained abnormally shaped cervical cells. If there are no abnormal cells, the *result* is reported as normal, or negative.

An abnormal Pap test does not mean you have cervical cancer. Approximately 4,000,000 Pap tests are done every year in Canada. About 8% (over 325,000) have abnormal results. The number of individuals that are actually diagnosed with cancer is around 1,400. Most of the abnormal cells found during a Pap test are the result of a cervical or vaginal infection.

Is it Normal to Feel Frightened by an Abnormal Pap Test?

Absolutely normal. Most individuals experience some level of anxiety when they are informed that they have abnormalities. It is important to remember that most individuals with an abnormal test result do not have cancer. However, talking to someone you trust may help you process the fear and anxiety you are experiencing.

It is important to note that many cervical abnormalities return to normal (regress) within one to two years. Additionally, most cervical cancers can take ten years to develop. You should not panic, as you may not need to rush into procedures and treatment.

How are the Different Abnormalities Classified and What Does Each One Mean?

Unsatisfactory smear:

What does this mean?

The doctor or nurse practitioner did not take an adequate sample, or if you are pregnant or take oral contraceptives, hormonal changes may have influenced the smear quality.

What happens next?

Repeat test in three months. This is the minimum time needed to replace new cells on the cervix.

Benign or reactive changes or mild atypia:

What does this mean?

Your cervix is normal. You may have a vaginal infection or sexually transmitted infection.

What happens next?

Treat any infection or wait for active virus to pass, then repeat Pap test in six months.

ASCUS (atypical squamous cells) or AGUS (atypical glandular cells) of undetermined significance:

What does this mean?

Cells cannot be classified. Most ASCUS regress or return to normal on their own. You may be infected with HPV.

What happens next?

You may have an HPV test. Repeat Pap test in 6 months.

LSIL (low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion), mild dysplasia, or CIN 1:

What does this mean?

These changes need to be watched. Most regress or return to normal. For women under 34 approximately 80% regress. For older women, approximately 40% regress. The cell changes may be caused by low hormone levels in menopausal and postmenopausal women.

What happens next?

You may be referred for a colposcopy, or you could repeat the Pap test in six months. In that time, you could try self-help options. Doctors may prescribe estrogen cream for a few weeks to clarify the cause of cell changes.

HSIL (high-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion), moderate to severe dysplasia, carcinoma in situ, adenocarcinoma in situ, CIN 2, or CIN 3:

What does this mean?

These are more severe abnormal results. This still is not cancer. No one can tell if they will progress or regress. You may be at risk of developing cervical cancer.

What happens next?

Colposcopy will be recommended, or you could repeat the Pap test in six months. In that time, you could try self-help options.

Squamous Carcinoma:

What does this mean?

These results indicate the presence of cancerous cells.

What happens next?

A colposcopy will be recommended immediately.

Remember: An abnormal Pap test does not always mean cervical cancer. When you learn of your abnormal Pap test, attempt to stay calm until you have all of the information available. It is then that you will be better equipped to make an educated treatment decision if it is necessary.

If you have any further questions regarding abnormal Pap tests or if you would like to see a health care provider regarding any sexual health matter, please contact us.

Sexual Health Questions? We have Answers!

Location:

47 St. Clare Avenue, St. John's, NL, A1C 2J9

Hours:

Monday: 9am – 4:30pm
Tuesday: 9am – 4:30pm
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