Pap tests and the human papillomavirus [HPV]
What is the human papillomavirus (HPV)?
The human papillomavirus (HPV) is a very common sexually transmitted infection. It usually causes no symptoms and goes away by itself, but can sometimes cause serious illnesses. There are over 100 different HPV types that affect various parts of the body.

Around 50 HPV types can affect the genital area, including the cervix. We call these types ‘genital HPV’, which are either low-risk or high-risk.

Genital HPV is very common and can be considered a normal part of being sexually active. Four out of five people have genital HPV at some time in their lives.

Of the 50 HPV types that can affect the cervix, around 15 high-risk HPV types have the potential to cause cervical cancer.

How do I know if I have genital HPV?
Most people will have genital HPV at some point in their lives and never even know it. The immune system usually clears the virus from the body naturally over time.

Sometimes you can tell you have genital HPV because genital warts appear. Genital warts are caused by low-risk HPV types and cannot cause cervical cancer or any other kind of cancer. However, not all HPV types cause warts.

Most women only become aware they have HPV if they have an abnormal Pap test result caused by the virus. Because HPV is very common, abnormal Pap tests are quite common too.

A Pap test checks for changes to the cells of the cervix. These cell changes are almost always caused by genital HPV and usually return to normal when the body has cleared the virus. Your doctor may suggest more regular Pap tests to monitor the cell changes. If the changes persist they can usually be treated before they become serious.
How did I get genital HPV?
Both men and women can get HPV and pass the virus on to sexual partners.

Genital HPV is spread through genital-skin to genital-skin contact during sexual activity (not just intercourse). The virus passes through tiny breaks in the skin and is not spread via blood or bodily fluids.

You can be exposed to HPV the first time sexual activity occurs, from only one sexual partner. Condoms only provide some protection, as they do not cover all of the genital skin.

What happens if I have genital HPV?
After entering the body, HPV will either remain inactive inside the body’s cells or it will become active. When active, warts can develop or it can cause abnormal changes to cervical cells. It can take many years for the virus to become active.

Once active, most HPV infections are cleared from the body naturally in around a year.

How is HPV related to cervical cancer?
HPV is found in almost all cases of cervical cancer. However, most women with genital HPV will not develop cervical cancer.

When high-risk HPV types take longer than usual to clear from the body, the virus can cause more serious changes to cervical cells. This increases the risk of cervical cancer.

It is unlikely that HPV causes cervical cancer by itself. Other factors that can increase the risk of cervical cancer include:

- smoking
- lower levels of immunity
- the presence of other sexually transmitted infections such as chlamydia or herpes
- long-term use of the contraceptive pill
- early age of first child birth.

The biggest risk factor for cervical cancer however, is not having regular Pap tests. It is important for women to have regular Pap tests so abnormal cell changes can be found, then either monitored or treated well before they may become cancerous.

What should I tell my partner?
Someone can have HPV for a long time without knowing it. It may be the result of sexual activity from many years ago. Finding out you or your partner has HPV doesn’t necessarily mean either of you has been unfaithful.

If you have HPV, your sexual partner is likely to have it too. While either of you may develop warts at some stage, it may be that neither of you have any symptoms.

If you’re worried about passing HPV on to your partner, talk to your doctor or nurse, or go to a sexual health centre for further advice.
How is HPV treated?
There is no treatment for HPV. Only the abnormal cervical cells or warts that are caused by HPV can be treated. If you have warts, your doctor can suggest the treatment most suitable for you.

If a Pap test indicates abnormal cervical cells are present, more frequent Pap tests may be required. If this is the case, talk to your doctor or nurse about how often you will need to return for tests. If cervical cells don’t return to normal within a set time, further tests and treatment may be required, depending on how serious the cell changes are.

Can I be tested for HPV?
A test is available that detects HPV types associated with cervical cancer, but is often not helpful in women under the age of 30. In this age group, HPV is very common but usually no cause for concern, because the immune system usually clears the virus from the body naturally.

However, HPV tests are useful for women who have had serious or ‘high-grade’ cervical cell changes that needed treatment. For these women, a HPV test is performed along with a Pap test to check that the abnormal cells and HPV infection are no longer there. Once both the Pap test and the HPV test are reported as negative twice in a row, the woman can return to two-yearly Pap tests. Medicare will cover the cost of the HPV test in this instance only.

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you would like more information about HPV testing or visit papscreen.org.au for a copy of our brochure HPV testing: for women with high-grade abnormal Pap tests.

A vaccine to prevent cervical cancer
A vaccine is available that can help protect against cervical cancer. The vaccine helps prevent infection with the two types of HPV which cause 70 per cent of cervical cancers. The vaccine is most effective when given to females before they are exposed to HPV – that is, before they commence sexual activity.

The vaccine can be used in females aged nine to 45 years and involves three injections over a six-month period. It is available free of charge to girls aged 12–13 through the National Immunisation Program. Outside of this time it costs around $450 for the three doses.

Speak to your doctor about whether the vaccine is right for you.
For more information about the HPV vaccine visit hpvvaccine.org.au

All women who have ever been sexually active should continue to have Pap tests every two years, even if they have had the vaccine. This is because the vaccine does not protect against all types of cancer-causing HPV, and may only provide limited protection for women who have already been exposed to HPV.

Remember – while HPV is very common, cervical cancer is not. Most women with genital HPV will not develop cervical cancer.
For more information on HPV, Pap tests or cervical cancer visit papscreen.org.au or call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.