

Abnormal Pap test results

What is a Pap test?

The Pap test is a quick and simple test to check for abnormal changes to the cells of the cervix. If these changes are found and managed early, up to 90 per cent of the most common type of cervical cancer may be prevented.

What does an unsatisfactory Pap test result mean?

An unsatisfactory Pap test result means that the laboratory staff could not see the cells well enough to give a report. In this case you may be asked to have a repeat Pap test. This is no cause for alarm.

Sometimes, a Pap test will show signs of inflammation. If the Pap test was otherwise satisfactory, you will be asked to have your next Pap test in two years time.

What does an abnormal Pap test result mean?

An abnormal Pap test result means that some of the cells of the cervix differ in some way from the normal cells. This occurs in around one in 15 Pap tests. An abnormal result very rarely means cervical cancer, and can be abnormal for a variety of reasons.

Types of abnormalities

Abnormalities can be either low-grade or high-grade.

Low-grade abnormalities

These are minor changes that usually disappear over time. Most low-grade abnormalities are due to an infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is very common and four out of five women will be exposed to HPV at some time in their lives. Most women with HPV will not develop cervical cancer.

HPV is passed on via genital-skin to genital-skin contact during sexual activity. The body usually clears the active virus naturally within one to two years. When certain types of HPV take longer to clear, there is an increased risk of cervical cancer.

Please turn over...

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Treatment for low-grade abnormalities

If your previous Pap tests were normal, your doctor or nurse will ask you to come back for a repeat Pap test in one year. This allows the body time to clear the HPV infection and for the abnormality to resolve itself.

If the repeat Pap test is abnormal you will be referred to a specialist for a colposcopy. This involves the specialist using an instrument called a colposcope, which provides a magnified view of the cervix to check the extent and nature of any abnormalities.

Some women with a low-grade abnormality may be referred directly for a colposcopy without the need for a repeat Pap test.

High-grade abnormalities

High-grade abnormalities are more serious changes to the cells of the cervix which, if left untreated, have a greater chance of developing into cervical cancer. It usually takes up to 10 years before high-grade abnormalities develop into cervical cancer.

Treatment for high-grade abnormalities

If you have a high-grade abnormality your doctor or nurse will refer you to a specialist for further investigation using a colposcope. During the colposcopy, a small sample of tissue (a biopsy) may be taken and sent to a laboratory for testing.

There are a number of options for treatment, depending on the severity of the abnormality. Various methods are used to remove the abnormal cells from the cervix, and your doctor will advise you of the best option for you.

For more information on Pap test results and abnormalities or to order the booklet *Pap test results: For women with an abnormal Pap test* contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 or visit papscreen.org.au

June 2011