

Information

Abnormal Pap test results

What is a Pap test?

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

What does an 'unsatisfactory' Pap test result mean?

This means that the laboratory staff could not see the cells well enough to give a report. In this case, you may need to have another Pap test. This is no cause for alarm.

Sometimes, a Pap test will show signs of inflammation (swelling). If this is the only change on your Pap test, you can have your next one in two years' time.

What does an 'abnormal' Pap test result mean?

This means that some of the cells of the cervix are different from the normal cells. This happens in around one in 10 Pap tests. This result rarely means cervical cancer. It can be abnormal for a range of reasons.

Types of abnormalities

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

Low-grade abnormalities

These are small changes that usually disappear over time. Most low-grade abnormalities are due to an infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is very common. Four out of five people will have it at some time in their lives. Most women with HPV will not go on to get cervical cancer.

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

Treatment for low-grade abnormalities

If your previous Pap tests were normal, you will need a repeat Pap test in one year. This gives the body time to clear the HPV infection.

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Abnormal Pap test results cont

If the repeat Pap test is abnormal, you will be referred for a colposcopy. This uses an instrument called a colposcope. The doctor looks at the cervix more closely with this to check for any abnormalities.

Some women with a low-grade abnormality may be sent for a colposcopy without having a repeat Pap test.

High-grade abnormalities

High-grade abnormalities are more serious changes to the cells of the cervix. If not treated, there is a greater chance of cervical cancer. It usually takes up to 10 years before high-grade abnormalities turn into cervical cancer.

Treatment for high-grade abnormalities

If you have a high-grade abnormality, you will need to have a colposcopy. 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 treatments available. These depend on how severe the abnormality is. 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 on 13 11 20 or visit papscreen.org.au

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