Pap tests and women over 70

Do I need to have Pap tests if I'm over 70?
If you have had at least two normal Pap test results in the five years before you turn 70, you can stop having Pap tests at 70. You can choose to keep having Pap tests after 70 but the risk of cervical cancer after regular normal Pap tests is small.

You may need to keep having Pap tests for a few more years if:
- you have not been having two-yearly Pap tests, or
- you have had abnormal results from recent Pap tests.

You should ask your doctor or nurse for advice.

Cervical cancer does occur in women over 70. This is usually in women who have not had regular Pap tests throughout their lives. Women who have two-yearly Pap tests, particularly until the end of their 60s, are unlikely to get cervical cancer later in life.

What is a Pap test?
The Pap test is a simple test used to check for abnormal changes to the cells of the cervix that may lead to cervical cancer. Pap tests are the best way for women to lower their risk of getting cervical cancer.

The Pap test is a screening test – it is not a test for diagnosing cancer. Screening for cervical cancer is possible because the cervical cells go through a series of changes before they become cancerous. If changes are found, more frequent Pap tests are done to see if the cells return to normal. If they don’t, further tests are usually done. Treatment at this stage is usually simple and successful.

What if I've been through menopause?
Menopause does not protect women from cervical cancer. Women over 50 are more likely to die from cervical cancer than younger women. Women who still have a cervix should keep having two-yearly Pap tests until the age of 70.

Please turn over...
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What if I’ve had a hysterectomy?
After a hysterectomy, most women do not need to have Pap tests. However, women will still need regular Pap tests or vaginal smears/vault smears (where a cell sample is taken from the top of the vagina) if they:

- still have a cervix
- had a hysterectomy as part of treatment for cancer
- have ever had a significant abnormality found on a Pap test
- have never had a Pap test.

Many women are not sure what type of hysterectomy they had. It is important they find out from their doctor. If the doctor has no records, they may need to do an internal examination, or take a cell sample to see if you need to keep having Pap tests.

HPV and cervical cancer
Some types of human papillomavirus (HPV) are linked to cervical cancer. HPV is spread through genital-skin to genital-skin contact. Four out of five people will have it at some time in their lives. It is so common that it is seen as a normal part of being sexually active.

Although HPV is very common, most women with HPV will not go on to get cervical cancer. After entering the body, HPV can either stay inactive or become active. When active, warts can develop or the virus can affect the cervical cells. When certain types of HPV take longer than usual to clear from the body, the risk of getting cervical cancer goes up.

As HPV can remain inactive inside the body’s cells for many years, women who are not currently sexually active, or who have not been sexually active for a long time, are still at risk of cervical cancer.

For more information about Pap tests contact your doctor or health service, visit papscreen.org.au or call the Cancer Council on 13 11 20.

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