

Information

Top 10 questions about cervical cancer, Pap tests and HPV

1. What causes cervical cancer?

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is the cause of almost all cases of cervical cancer. The biggest risk factor for cervical cancer is not having a Pap test every two years.

2. What are the symptoms of cervical cancer?

The early stages of cervical cancer often have no symptoms. The only way to know if there are abnormal cells on the cervix is to have a Pap test. Sometimes abnormal bleeding, discharge or pain may be a sign of cervical cancer and should be checked by a doctor immediately.

3. What is a Pap test?

The Pap test is a simple test used to check for changes to the cells of the cervix that, if not treated, may lead to cervical cancer. A doctor or specially trained nurse takes a sample of cells from the cervix and puts it onto a glass slide. The slide is tested at a laboratory and results are usually available within two weeks.

4. Does the Pap test hurt?

Most women don't find the Pap test painful but sometimes it can be uncomfortable. If the Pap test hurts, tell your doctor or nurse immediately.

5. How accurate is the Pap test?

The Pap test is about 90 per cent accurate. Most cases of cervical cancer take up to 10 years to develop. Any changes that are missed on one test are usually picked up two years later before they become a serious problem. It is not necessary to have a Pap test more often, unless your doctor advises it.

6. When should women start having Pap tests?

Women should start having Pap tests about a year after their first sexual contact or at the age of 18, whichever comes later. Sexual contact includes genital-skin to genital-skin contact. Lesbians need Pap tests too

Please turn over...

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7. What is the role of HPV in cervical cancer?

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is linked to most cervical abnormalities and almost all cases of cervical cancer.

There are many types of HPV and over 40 types affect the genital area. HPV is very common. Four out of five people will have HPV at some point in their lives. Most women with HPV will not go on to get cervical cancer.

HPV is passed on via genital-skin to genital-skin contact during sexual activity. The body's immune system usually clears HPV by itself. When some types of HPV take longer than usual to clear from the body, there is a higher risk of getting cervical cancer. The HPV vaccine protects against two types of HPV that cause around 70 per cent of cervical cancers.

8. Does an abnormal Pap test result mean I have cancer?

Most Pap test results are normal. A small number show abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix. Most of these changes are minor infections that can be easily treated or clear up naturally. In a very small number of cases, the changes may turn into cervical cancer. When found early, changes to the cells of the cervix are easy to treat. That is why having a Pap test every two years is so important.

9. What about women who have had a hysterectomy?

Some women who have had a hysterectomy still need to have regular Pap tests. 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 gynaecological cancer
- have ever had a significant abnormality found on a Pap test
- have never had a Pap test.

Women who have had a hysterectomy should check with their doctor if unsure.

10. What about women who have gone through menopause?

Menopause does not protect women from cervical cancer. Most cases of cervical cancer occur in women over 40 years. All women need to keep having a Pap test every two years until the age of 70.

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

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