



When did you last have a Pap smear?

Most cancer of the cervix could be prevented if each woman had a Pap smear every two years

National Cervical Screening Program

A joint Australian, State and Territory Government Initiative

DON'T MAKE EXCUSES, MAKE AN APPOINTMENT

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What is a Pap smear?

A Pap smear is a simple test to check your cervix to make sure it is healthy. Your cervix is the opening of the uterus, and is at the top of your vagina (see the diagram below).

A Pap smear takes only a few minutes and is not painful.

Having a Pap smear every two years is the best way to prevent cancer of the cervix.

Why have a Pap smear?

A Pap smear can show the early warning signs of cancer of the cervix. Sometimes the cells of the cervix change from healthy to unhealthy (abnormal). A Pap smear can find abnormal cells before cancer develops.

What causes cervical cancer?

An infection with a virus called HPV (human papillomavirus) is the cause of almost all cervical cancers. There are over 100 different types of HPV. Two of these types are known to cause most of the cervical cancer cases in Australia.

HPV is very common. Most people (four out of five) will have HPV at some time in their lives. Anyone who has ever had sex can have HPV.

In most cases, HPV clears up by itself in a few years. Sometimes the virus can stay in your body longer, and can lead to cervical cancer. This usually takes a long time – about 10 years.

A Pap smear every two years can find cell changes caused by HPV before they turn into cancer. Your doctor, nurse or health worker can then make sure your health is monitored and that you get treatment if you need it, so you can stay healthy.

Who needs a Pap smear?

All women between the ages of 18 and 70 who have ever had sex should have a Pap smear every two years. Even if you have only ever had sex with your husband, you should still have regular Pap smears.

What if I've had a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus)?

You might still need to have Pap smears depending on the type of hysterectomy you have had. Talk to your doctor, nurse or health worker about what is best for you.

How is a Pap smear done?

This is what happens...

First the doctor asks you to undress from the waist down and to lie on your back for the examination. You can ask for a female doctor. Next the doctor will use a speculum (medical instrument) to open your vagina so your cervix can be seen more clearly.

Some cells are gently wiped from your cervix with a small brush or spatula (a small plastic or wooden stick). The cells are placed on a glass slide and sent to a laboratory where they are looked at under a microscope.

What does it feel like?

Sometimes having a Pap smear can be a little embarrassing. Remember, for the person doing the smear,

this is just part of their everyday work and they are not embarrassed.

The procedure might be a bit uncomfortable, but it shouldn't hurt. If it hurts, tell your doctor, nurse or health worker straight away.

What about the results?

When you have your Pap smear it is important that you ask your doctor when and how you will find out about the results.

Most results are normal

What if my results are not normal?

If your results are not normal this does not mean you have cancer. Very often it will be that you have something simple like an infection that will clear up naturally.

Sometimes a woman may need to have a Pap smear more often. Some types of abnormal cells may need to be treated by a specialist. Make sure you talk to your doctor, nurse or health worker about what is best for you.

I have been through menopause. Do I still need Pap smears?

Yes, the risk of getting cancer in the cervix increases with age. If you have ever had sex, even with only one partner, it is important to keep having Pap smears every two years, even after menopause.

I have noticed some unusual (not normal) bleeding

If you have any unusual bleeding or discharge from your vagina, see your doctor as soon as possible.

I don't remember when I last had a Pap smear

Your doctor or health clinic may have a system to remind you when it is time for your next Pap smear. Each state and territory has a register where the results of your Pap smear are recorded. A reminder letter will be sent to you when you are overdue for your next Pap smear or follow-up treatment. If you do not want your information recorded on the register or to get reminder letters, tell your doctor.

Where can I have my Pap smear?

You can make an appointment with your doctor, nurse or a family planning clinic in your local area. You can ask for a woman doctor or nurse to take your Pap smear. If you want an interpreter present, say this when arranging the appointment. It is also fine if you want to take a friend or family member with you.

I have heard about a new vaccine that may prevent cervical cancer

Yes, a vaccine is available that can prevent infection with the types of HPV that cause most cases of cervical cancer. The vaccine is approved in Australia for females between the ages of 9 and 26 years. Free HPV vaccine is available under the National Immunisation Program.

The vaccine is best if given to young people before they start having sex. The vaccine aims to prevent cervical cancer in future generations of women. If you are aged between 12 and 26 years or if you have a daughter aged between 12 and 26 years, talk to your doctor about commencing the vaccine.

Regular Pap smears are still essential as the vaccine will prevent some of the types of HPV that cause cancer of the cervix.

Regular Pap smears are still essential as the HPV vaccine does not protect against all the HPV types that can cause cervical cancer.

More information on HPV and vaccination is available on the Immunise Australia Program website at www.immunise.health.gov.au

The best protection against cancer of the cervix is to have regular

For more information on having a Pap smear, or if you want to update or remove your details from the Pap test register in your state or territory, phone 13 15 56 (for the cost of a local call).

If you have difficulty communicating in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Services for assistance on 13 14 50. This will cost the same as a local telephone call.

You can also visit our website at www.cancerscreening.gov.au