

Patient Education

Patient Care Services



Your Pap Test Results

What they mean

This handout explains what your Pap test results mean. It also gives information about follow-up care you may need.

The current national recommendation (as of 2009) is for women to start having Pap tests at the age of 21. After that, women who have not had an abnormal Pap test should have the test:

- Every 2 years for women aged 21 to 30
- Every 3 years for women aged 30 or older whose last 3 Pap tests were normal

If you have a history of abnormal Pap tests or have risk factors for *cervical dysplasia*, ask your provider how often to have a Pap test done. Cervical dysplasia is abnormal cell growth on the cervix. It may be caused by smoking or having a weakened (suppressed) immune system.

Keep in mind that your Pap test is only one part of your annual preventive health care visit. We suggest seeing your provider once a year for other reasons, such as a breast exam and to review any medicines you are taking.

Pap Smear

A “Pap smear” is the term for the cells that were collected from your cervix during your Pap test. These cells were put into a container and sent to a lab. Lab staff who are trained to “read” Pap tests examined these cells. Your results should be ready in about 2 to 4 weeks, and we will mail them to you. If your results require any follow-up, your health care provider will contact you.

Results

Your Pap test result will be one of these (see “Terms” on the next page for definitions of some of these words):

- Unsatisfactory specimen
- Within normal limits
- Atypical *squamous* cells of undetermined significance (ASCUS), Negative for *human papillomavirus* (HPV)
- Atypical *squamous* cells of undetermined significance (ASCUS), Positive for HPV

- Low-grade *squamous intraepithelial lesions* (LGSIL)
- High-grade *squamous intraepithelial lesions* (HGSIL)

See the “What Your Results Mean” section to learn more about these 6 test results, including how the cells look, what the findings mean, and what follow-up is needed.

Terms

- **Squamous** cells form the surface of your cervix.
- **Human papillomavirus (HPV)** is a group of over 100 viruses.
- **Intraepithelial** cells are cells on the surface of your cervix.
- A **lesion** is any abnormal tissue.

What Your Results Mean

“Unsatisfactory Specimen”

This result means the lab was not able to “read” your container of cells. Because of this, your cells cannot be described. An unsatisfactory specimen may be caused by:

- Having menstrual blood or semen in the sample of cells
- Leakage of the collection fluid from the container
- Not collecting enough cells (more common for women in menopause)
- Not having any *endocervical* cells in the sample (these are cells from the narrow opening in your cervix that leads to your uterus)

Follow-up: If you get this result, you may need to have another Pap test in 3 to 12 months. This will depend on your previous Pap test results and why this sample was unsatisfactory.

“Within Normal Limits”

This result means only normal cells were seen in the sample. No follow-up is needed.

“Atypical Squamous Cells of Undetermined Significance (ASCUS), Negative HPV”

This result means that there are many normal cells present, but some of the cells have irregular colors, shapes, and sizes. Your Pap test did **not** show any sign of high-risk types of HPV. Ask your provider for our handout, “Human Papillomavirus (HPV): What you should know.”

If you have vaginal itching or discharge, you will need to be checked to find out if you have an infection. Sometimes an infection can make cells look abnormal. If you have an infection, you will need to be treated for it.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help.

Women's Health Care Center:
206-598-5500

General Internal Medicine Center:
206-598-8750

Family Medical Center:
206-598-4055

Maternal and Infant Care Center:
206-598-4070

Follow-up: The chance of these cell changes becoming more serious is low. Only 9 out of 10,000 women with this kind of Pap result require closer follow-up. It is safe and recommended to repeat your Pap test in 1 year.

"Atypical Squamous Cells of Undetermined Significance (ASCUS), Positive HPV"

This result means that there are many normal cells present, but some of the cells have irregular colors, shapes, and sizes. Your Pap test showed signs of high-risk types of HPV. Ask your provider for our handout, "Human Papillomavirus (HPV): What you should know."

The presence of high-risk HPV "subtypes" (kinds of HPV cells) is linked to a higher risk of cervical cancer. **Important:** This result does **not** mean you have cancer.

Follow-up: You will need to have a *colposcopy* done. A *colposcope* is a lighted magnifying lens that is used to look closely at the vagina and cervix. It helps your provider see details of your cervical tissue.

If a lesion is found, a small sample of tissue can be removed and tested. Also, cells from the inside of your cervical canal can be removed to assure that there are no hidden lesions.

The rest of your follow-up care will be based on the results of your colposcopy exam.

"Low-Grade Squamous Intraepithelial Lesions (LGSIL)"

This result means that there are some abnormal cells present. When only these types of cells are present, invasive cancer is **not** often found.

Follow-up: You will need to have a colposcopy done. (See the description above, under "ASCUS, Positive HPV.")

"High-Grade Squamous Intraepithelial Lesions (HGSIL)"

This result means that abnormal cells are present. The cells appeared to be the kind often found in advanced stages of abnormal cell growth and cell changes. If these cells are not checked and treated, they can entirely replace the normal cells in that area and be "pre-cancerous."

Most women with this Pap test result do not have cervical cancer.

For those who do develop cervical cancer, it happens slowly, over about 6 to 10 years.

Follow-up: You will need to have a colposcopy done. (See the description above, under "ASCUS, Positive HPV.")

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