

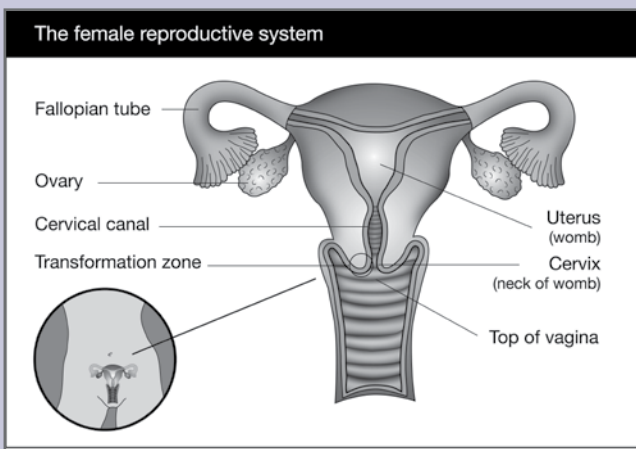
An abnormal
Pap smear -
what does it mean?



It is natural to feel worried if you have just found out that your Pap smear result is not normal (abnormal).

Around 1 in 10 Pap smears will show changes in the cells of the cervix. These are rarely cancer. In fact, less than 1% of abnormalities are cancer.

A Pap smear can detect early changes in the cells of the cervix (neck of the womb) at the top of the vagina. If abnormal changes are found, further tests may be done to see if treatment is needed. Treatment can usually be done easily and successfully.



Source: Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing

Key facts:

- Almost all abnormal Pap smear results are caused by the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV).
- HPV is a virus that can infect any part of the genitals.
- Anyone who has ever had sex can have HPV - it is so common that four out of five people will have had HPV at some time in their lives.
- In most cases, HPV clears up by itself in one to two years.
- In rare cases, if left undetected or untreated and HPV persists, abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix may progress to cervical cancer. This usually takes up to 10 years.
- Pap smears are the best available screening test to prevent cervical cancer.

The information overleaf outlines the different types of abnormalities. Your doctor will explain what your Pap smear result means, when you should have your next smear or whether further investigations are required. If you experience any unusual bleeding, discharge or pain, alert your doctor as soon as possible.

What is an unsatisfactory Pap smear?

This means there was a technical problem with the smear and that the laboratory staff cannot see the cells clearly enough to give a full report. Your doctor may ask you to have a repeat smear even though no abnormal cells were detected.

What does an abnormal Pap smear result mean?

This means that some of the cells of the cervix look different from the normal cells when looked at under a microscope in the laboratory. Here are some of the most common reasons for an abnormal Pap smear:

Possible low-grade abnormalities

A possible low-grade abnormality means changes in the cells of the cervix are detected, although the cause of these changes is not always obvious. These changes may be due to inflammation, but are sometimes due to infections such as with HPV.

Low-grade abnormalities

A definite low-grade abnormality means cell changes are present that indicate infection with HPV. Although some people develop visible warts, the vast majority of women don't even know they have been infected with HPV until it shows up on a Pap smear. Like many viral infections, most cases of HPV will be cleared by the body over time. However, some types of HPV persist and for this reason cell changes need to be monitored.

The follow-up of women with possible or definite low-grade abnormalities is generally the same, but may vary according to your age and whether you have had abnormal results in the past. Your doctor will explain the follow-up you require.

Possible high-grade abnormalities

A possible high-grade abnormality means you may have an HPV infection which has persisted and caused abnormal cell changes. These cell changes suggest a high-grade abnormality, but are not clear enough to justify a 'definite' diagnosis and need to be investigated.

High-grade abnormalities

A definite high-grade abnormality means the cells of the cervix are developing in an abnormal way. These cells are rarely cancer, but need to be investigated. If they are left untreated and persist, they have the potential to progress to cancer.

Glandular abnormalities

Glandular abnormalities are seen in cells from the top part of the cervix that leads to the uterus or womb. These changes are uncommon. All glandular abnormalities are referred for colposcopy (see overleaf), as they can be harder to monitor by Pap smear alone.

Further information on HPV is available from the WA Cervical Cancer Prevention Program.

Ask your doctor to explain exactly what your abnormal Pap smear result means. Make sure you understand what happens next and why. This can save you a lot of needless worry.

What is colposcopy?

Colposcopy is a magnified examination of the cervix done by a specially qualified doctor. It usually takes about 15 minutes and is a similar procedure to a Pap smear. It is not an operation and no anaesthetic or hospital stay is necessary.

A colposcope is a special microscope on a stand. It is positioned outside your body. The doctor then looks through the colposcope at your cervix and vagina and can see abnormal areas that are otherwise invisible to the naked eye.

During colposcopy the doctor will use a harmless solution on your cervix to highlight any abnormal areas and may take a tiny piece of tissue (biopsy) from them. This may sting for a short time. The biopsy is sent to a pathology laboratory to be examined and the results are usually available within 1-2 weeks. Make arrangements with your doctor to get your results.

What if I need treatment?

If you need further treatment your doctor will discuss this with you when you have your colposcopy, or when your biopsy results have come back from the pathology laboratory.

Feel free to ask as many questions as you like so that you understand what is going on and why. There is a list of questions overleaf that you may find useful.

There are a variety of treatments available. Your doctor will discuss with you the best form of treatment for you. The most common types of treatment are outlined below and continue overleaf.

Wire Loop

The abnormal cells are scooped from the cervix with a fine wire loop. This whole procedure usually takes about 15 minutes. A local anaesthetic is used and a hospital stay is usually not required.

Laser

The abnormal cells on the surface of the cervix are removed by a laser (high-frequency light beam). This whole procedure usually takes about 15 minutes and is done in the specialist's rooms using a local anaesthetic. Sometimes a general anaesthetic is preferred and a short hospital stay is required.

Diathermy

The abnormal cells are destroyed using heat from an electric current. This is usually carried out under a general anaesthetic and may require a day in hospital.

Cone biopsy

This is a minor operation to remove a small cone-shaped piece of tissue from the cervix. The tissue is then examined in a pathology laboratory to check if the abnormal area has been completely removed.

Having a cone biopsy requires a general anaesthetic and a day or overnight stay in hospital. Only a small number of women with an abnormal Pap smear result will need this treatment.

Hysterectomy

A hysterectomy (an operation to remove the uterus) is rarely required for an abnormal Pap smear, unless invasive cancer is found. Hysterectomies are performed for many reasons other than cancer. Your doctor will advise you if this surgery is recommended.

What happens after treatment?

Some women experience abdominal cramps after treatment. This can be like a painful period. It is also normal to have a dark or watery vaginal discharge for up to 2-4 weeks. This may include the passing of small clots while your cervix heals.

You will be advised not to have sexual intercourse for about one month while your cervix is healing. Some women find that it takes longer before they feel like having sexual intercourse again. Your doctor may also advise you not to use tampons for a short while.

Following any abnormality, you will need to have regular check-ups, as recommended by your doctor.

After treatment for a high-grade abnormality, these check-ups may include further colposcopy and other tests such as a HPV DNA test to monitor your status (see table below).

Management after treatment for high-grade abnormalities

**4-6 months
after treatment**



Pap smear
and colposcopy
with specialist

**12 months
after treatment**



Pap smear
and HPV DNA test
with GP

**24 months
after treatment**



Pap smear and
HPV DNA test
with GP

All abnormal results need to be monitored carefully.

Make sure you keep these important appointments!

Questions you may want to ask your doctor

- What does my Pap smear result mean?
- Do I need more tests?
- What does my biopsy show?
- What treatment do you advise and why?
- Are there other options?
- Will I need time off work?
- What if/can I get pregnant?
- When will the bleeding/vaginal discharge stop?
- Will this affect my sex life?
- When is my next check-up due?
- How often will I need to come back?
- How else can I care for myself?
- Can you give me more information about HPV?

My notes

Where can I get more information?

- **WA Cervical Cancer Prevention Program**

13 15 56 (cost of a local call) or
1800 800 033 (toll free from the country)

If you have difficulty communicating in English phone the Translating and Interpreting Service for assistance on **13 14 50** (for the cost of a local phone call).

- **National Cervical Screening Program**

Log on to the Australian Government Department of Health & Ageing's National Cervical Screening Program website at www.cancerscreening.gov.au

You can download the National Abnormal Pap Smear Result booklet from this website. Under **Publications and resources**, click on the **Cervical Publications** link. The booklet is under the **Consumers** category.

National Cervical Screening Program

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