

When You Have an Abnormal Pap Smear

Not that long ago, the medical standard in pap smears was for women to have an annual pelvic exam and pap smear. But in the last year, studies have shown that to be unnecessary due to the slow growth of human papillomavirus, or HPV, cells which are the abnormal cells that are the basis of nearly all cervical cancers. It can take those cells ten to thirty years to become cancerous, which negates the need for yearly testing.

Consequently, a concern has arisen among doctors that more frequent testing could lead to unnecessary health scares and procedures for women under the age of 30. To that end, the standard has been changed for women aged 30 to 65 years of age, as of December 1, 2017. A pap smear every three years is recommended, or a pap smear with an HPV test, known as co-testing, every five years.

Once you have your pap smear, your pap smear results are classified as having either a negative or a positive result. Negative results mean that your cervical cells all looked normal. An abnormal pap smear result is referred to as a “positive result,” and indicates there were cells present that did not follow guidelines for normal cervical cells, due to their shape, size or location. These changes are classified by one of the following labels: atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance (ASCUS), squamous intraepithelial lesions, atypical glandular cells and adenocarcinoma cells. These four types of cells classify what the difference is between these abnormal cells and healthy cells, and whether or not they are precancerous.

Causes of an Abnormal Pap Smear Test

An abnormal pap smear test means that cells have been found that do not look like normal healthy cells, which can be caused by a number of things, as mentioned above. It does not mean that you have cancer. These results mean that the lab technician has noticed some differences or changes from the way your cells looked as compared to previous pap smear results or that there are cells outside the range of what a healthy cervical cell looks. Abnormal pap smear results are more than likely the result of a vaginal or cervical infection, which your gynecologist will help you treat.

How to prevent an Abnormal Pap Smear

While you cannot prevent a pap smear with abnormal cells completely, there are a few things you can do to make sure your pap smear is as clear as possible. The following situations could cause a muddy pap smear result:

- Do not schedule your pap smear test during your period.
 - If it is the end of your period and there is light bleeding occurring, simply double check with your doctor to make sure that will not cause interference before proceeding with your appointment.
 - A basic guideline is to schedule it five days after the last day of your period.
 - Do not use tampons two to three days before your test
- If you're pregnant, talk to your doctor first about scheduling your pap smear test.

- If you have any type of infection, you will need to wait until it has completely cleared up before you have a pap smear. If you were on medications for an infection, you should wait at least two weeks for the medications to clear your system completely before you have a pap smear.
- Do not have sex, douche or use birth control foams two to three days before your appointment

One of the main reasons for getting a pap smear is to check for precancerous cells as well as HPV. While abnormal cells do not mean you definitely have cancer or HPV, an abnormal pap smear result is something your doctor will want to follow up on in some way.

To be clear, HPV is common, especially since there are so many different strains of the virus, and not all of them are high risk viruses. It is estimated that all adults in the U.S. will have one type of HPV at some in their lives, unbeknownst to them and it goes away on its own. According to the Center for Disease Control, HPV causes cancer in 30,700 men and women out of the almost 80 million people in the U.S that are currently affected by HPV.

Tests That May Follow an Abnormal Pap Smear

So the first thing your New York gynecologist will want to rule out is HPV. While your pap smear test will capture some of the different strains of the human papillomavirus, it will not detect them all. So your doctor may ask you to have a second pap smear done to double check the results. Sometimes, because cervical cancers are such slow growers, your next pap smear will be scheduled as much as a year away.

Should your doctor decide that your abnormal pap smear bears further investigation, he will instruct you on what to do next.

- He may schedule an HPV test, which catches every kind of HPV, whereas the pap smear would have caught only certain strains of the virus.
- A colposcopy, which is a procedure that uses a magnifying tool that allows the doctor to see your cervix more clearly, may be ordered.
- A biopsy may be required, which is the removal of a tiny sampling of tissue at the end of the colposcopy procedure.

Diagnoses that May Result from an Abnormal Pap Smear

The most common diagnoses that result from an abnormal pap smear result are HPV and cervical cancer. Approximately 13,000 pap smears detect cancer, for every 3.5 million pap smears performed. Chances are small that your abnormal pap smear result will become cancer and since they are such slow-growing cancers, your doctor would be able to catch cervical cancer early with a follow up test within 12 months. The HPV vaccine does make an impact and if you are a woman under the age of 26 or a man younger than 21, you can still get the vaccine.

Is Treatment Required?

If your doctor believes your abnormal cells are precancerous or due to HPV, then abnormal cells may be dealt with in one of two ways:

- Excisional treatment, where the abnormal cells are harvested for closer study. This can be done with either a thin metal loop that scrapes the cervix or a conization is performed, which removes a cone-shaped segment of tissue from your cervix.
- Ablative treatment, which is the destruction of abnormal tissues, leaving nothing behind for study. This treatment also has two different modes, one being cryotherapy where the cells are frozen off and the other being laser therapy where the cells are lasered off.

If you are pregnant, treatment for any kind of positive pap smear result is not typically undergone during a pregnancy. If abnormal cells are not flushed from your system during the birthing process, then your doctor will decide from there whether further action is needed or not.