

HPV testing and genotyping: what, why and when

This document provides information on the tests that can help you and your provider keep tabs on any high risk infection.

HPV basics

- HPV is a virus that attacks cells on or near the skin and other surfaces in the body.
- Its full name is Human Papillomavirus.
- HPV is very common. About 80% of women will get it in their lifetime.
- There are over 100 different types of HPV.
- Different types cause different diseases, like plantar and skin warts, genital warts and cancers in the genital region, such as cervical cancer, as well as head and neck cancers.
- Most HPV infections will clear up on their own, probably without you even knowing you have HPV.

HPV's link to cervical cancer

- Over a dozen different HPV types have been shown to have the potential to cause cervical cancer, as well as vulvar, vaginal and anal cancer.
- Most HPV types do not cause cancer, but some types might put you at risk. These 'high-risk' types are the ones we want to follow more closely.
- If a high-risk HPV infection does not clear on its own, it is called a persistent HPV infection.
- Sometimes persistent HPV infections can lead to changes in the cells on the cervix. Usually, these cervical changes happen slowly, over a period of years.
- These cell changes can be treated if they are detected early. But if they are not treated, the infection can grow and become cervical cancer.
- There are a number of ways to treat these early cervical changes. Talk to your healthcare provider about best treatment options for you.

Numerous tests can indicate the presence of HPV

Several different tests screen for HPV infection.

The Pap Test tells when there are changes in the cells of the cervix. This test has been used in the US for over 50 years. During this time period, there has been more than a 70% reduction in cervical cancer deaths in the US and other industrialized countries using Pap tests for routine screening.

There are two methods for Pap tests.

- One method involves brushing the cervix with a spatula and broom, and then 'smearing' what is collected on a slide.
- The second and more commonly used method in the US today involves collecting a specimen with the spatula and broom, and then putting it into a liquid that can be plated onto a slide.

HPV Tests — New tests are now available to help us learn which HPV infections to treat and which we can watch to see if they clear up on their own.

An HPV test can discover if you have been infected with high-risk or cancer-causing HPV types.

- In some women, infection with these high risk HPV types can lead to an abnormal Pap test and, if left untreated, to cervical cancer.
- An HPV test is conducted uses the remaining liquid from the Pap test.
- An HPV test only tells us if a woman has an HPV infection, not which type or types of HPV are causing the infection.
- For instance, if a women has HPV 16 or HPV 18, her HPV test would return only a 'positive' result.

HPV genotyping (also known as HPV typing)

can identify the specific HPV type, not just test for the presence of any type.

- For instance, if a woman has HPV 16 or HPV 18, her HPV typing test would return a result of 'HPV 16' or 'HPV 18.'
- Like an HPV test, this test is often taken from the same sample as the Pap test or by an additional gentle swab of your cervix at the time of a Pap test and performed by a healthcare provider in the office.

Why and when to get an HPV test or HPV genotyping test

- If your Pap test is borderline abnormal, or considered to be of "undetermined significance" (ASCUS), then an HPV test can help decide if you might benefit from taking a closer look at your cervix with a magnifying scope called a 'colposcope.'
- If you are 30 years of age or older, an HPV test may be used in conjunction with a Pap test. The HPV test can determine whether additional testing, such as colposcopy, may help to find abnormal cells.
- If you have had a cervical procedure like a LEEP or cone biopsy, an HPV test might provide additional information to guide the management and timing of your cervical cancer screening after you have the procedure.

- Since it is now known that infection with HPV 16, HPV 18, and certain other HPV types carry a higher risk of causing cancer than infections with other HPV types, HPV genotyping can be used in some cases to gain a better understanding of a woman's risk of developing cancer. With HPV genotyping information, it is possible for you and your healthcare provider to make better decisions about your plan for follow-up screening and further testing.

These tests are not for everyone

HPV testing and HPV genotyping are recommended for very few women. There are a number of reasons.

- If your Pap test shows a true pre-cancerous abnormality, then you can assume your HPV test would be positive because nearly all cases of pre-cancerous and cancerous lesions are associated with HPV. There would be no need for any HPV test because it adds no new information.
- If you are 30 or over, your healthcare provider might want to perform an HPV test at the time of a Pap test. If the HPV test is negative and the Pap test is normal, you might not need to repeat either for years.
- If you have a normal Pap test and are HPV positive, your provider might want to consider HPV genotyping to help develop a plan for your follow-up screening.



SUMMARY

- HPV is very common.
- Most infections will go away on their own as a result of your body's immune system getting rid of them.
- HPV testing and HPV genotyping can be very useful in informing you and your provider about the best timing and frequency for cervical cancer screening.
- HPV testing and genotyping are NOT for everyone.
- If you have precancerous cervical changes, you can assume you have been infected with a high risk HPV. Testing for HPV will not change the management of your cervical changes.

For more information, visit our Web site: foundationforwomenscancer.org

The Foundation for Women's Cancer is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization whose mission is to ensure public awareness of gynecologic cancer prevention, early detection and optimal treatment. In addition, the Foundation supports research and training related to gynecologic cancers. The Foundation advances this mission by increasing public and private funds that aid in the development and implementation of programs to meet these goals.

For more information about the Foundation, its educational materials or research grants, please visit foundationforwomenscancer.org, or contact the Foundation Headquarters Office by phone at 312.578.1439, or by e-mail at info@foundationforwomenscancer.org. For additional information on gynecologic cancers or for a referral to a gynecologic oncologist or a related specialist, please call the toll-free Foundation Information Hotline at 800.444.4441.



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