

Understanding HPV



Abbott Pathology

For many years, Pap smears have been the most effective way to tell if a woman is at risk of developing cervical cancer. The Pap smear may also identify a common viral infection called Human Papillomavirus (HPV). This brochure gives you some important facts about HPV and current testing procedures.

What is HPV and why is it so important?

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a common viral infection that can cause skin warts and affect the genital tract in both men and women. There are many types of HPV, some of which affect the female genital tract causing lesions on the vulva, vagina and/or cervix.

HPV has been identified as one of the primary causes for atypical changes in cervical cells from a Pap smear. While most women with a HPV diagnosis will not be affected, HPV infection can lead to significant abnormality, precancer or cancer in a small number of cases, thus making testing very important.

HPV types can be divided into two groups:

- **low risk types:** which may cause genital warts and minor changes in the cervix
- **high risk types:** which, in addition to minor changes, sometimes cause precancerous changes and cervical cancer.

Testing women for the presence of a high risk HPV type helps identify the small percentage at risk of developing precancerous changes and cancer.

How is HPV acquired?

Having HPV is not uncommon. It is an infection that can affect anyone who is, or has been, sexually active. In the vast majority of cases HPV infection is temporary and harmless, causing no problem. However, persistent infection with a high risk HPV type can be linked to an increased risk of precancerous changes and cancer of the cervix.

How do I know if I have HPV?

Unlike other viral or bacterial infections, HPV does not cause you to feel unwell or experience irritation, discharge or bleeding. HPV may be present for several years before it causes characteristic changes in the cervical cells that are identified in a routine Pap test. The presence of HPV in the genital tract is most often detected in a routine Pap test. This is more common than discovering genital warts. Most women with HPV changes don't ever develop warts, and most do not realise they have the infection. However, HPV can be detected through a simple test which identifies the presence of high risk types linked with cervical precancer and cancer.

How can HPV testing help me?

HPV testing may be useful when a Pap test has shown abnormal cells or has been difficult to evaluate. In some women with abnormal or conclusive Pap smears, HPV tests can assist in determining the necessity for further treatment. If high risk HPV types are not detected, i.e., a negative result is determined, further investigations may be unnecessary. Negative results in both the Pap and HPV tests mean a significant or high grade lesion is unlikely. This can be reassuring, especially if you previously had a number of abnormal, inconclusive or unsatisfactory smears.

Collecting the sample for HPV testing

The process of collecting cells for the HPV test is simple and can be performed either at the same time as your Pap smear or on a separate visit. Cells are scraped or brushed gently from the cervix in a similar way to a Pap test. If you had a BD SurePath™ test with your Pap smear, this specimen can also be used for the HPV test. Once collected, the cells are sent to our laboratory for expert analysis and your doctor is notified of the results.

What happens next?

The information about your HPV result, combined with the Pap test result, enables your doctor to assess whether you require further investigation or normal ongoing Pap smears.

If changes are present in your Pap test and you have a high risk HPV type, your doctor may suggest a colposcopy. This is a procedure undertaken by a gynaecologist, where a specialised microscope is used to examine the cervix under magnification. This procedure may also be necessary for women with marked Pap test changes, even if a high risk HPV type is not detected.

All HPV test results are forwarded to the Pap Smear Register, together with your Pap test result, in accordance with the Public Health Act 2005, unless you choose to opt-off. This must be indicated on the request form.

The main advantages of the HPV test

HPV testing may reduce the uncertainty and anxiety caused by abnormal or inconclusive Pap smear results. The test can identify women with an increased risk of developing cervical precancer or, in rare circumstances, cancer. This enables doctors to monitor at risk women more closely.

The HPV test may prevent delays in receiving further appropriate investigation if your Pap smear is mildly abnormal. It may also prevent further unnecessary examinations if you do not have a high risk HPV type. However, you will still need regular Pap tests.

How is HPV infection treated?

If only minor changes show in your Pap smear and a high risk HPV type is not evident, then you are at a low risk of progressing to a precancerous or cancerous change in your cervix. In this instance, your doctor may recommend a Pap smear follow up protocol, rather than further treatment. Cervical lesions, whether caused by a low risk HPV type or by persistent infection with a high risk HPV type, can almost always be easily treated. Your doctor will be able to discuss effective treatment options with you. The lesions are generally quite small and may be removed either with surgical, diathermy or laser treatment. Remember that cervical cancer is a rare condition. Advances in cytology testing have led to the prevention of many cases, with procedures such as the HPV test playing a role in reducing the incidence of cervical cancer.

Do HPV tests attract a Medicare rebate?

Medicare Australia has introduced an item number for the HPV test, in some instances allowing women to claim a rebate on the test. In order to make a claim for this test you are required to meet a set of criteria. Please discuss this with your doctor. The rebate has been introduced for women who have previously been treated for a high grade cervical lesion. At present it is recommended that these women have annual Pap smears. However, the regulations allow them to return to routine two-yearly screening once their results show two consecutive negative Pap smears and HPV tests within a 24 month period.

For further information,
please speak with your doctor

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