

# The importance of a Pap Smear

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A Pap Smear is a procedure to test for cervical cancer in women. It is done by collecting cells from your cervix - the lower, narrow end of your uterus that is at the top of the vagina.



Cervical cancer is the 2nd most common cancer among South African women, but the cancer women die of most in our country. Detecting cervical cancer at an early stage can save your life. The primary underlying cause of cervical cancer in women is the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), transmitted through skin-to-skin contact, body fluids, and sexual intercourse.

Women must be aware of symptoms and what is normal for their bodies.

## Symptoms

- Abnormal bleeding between periods.
- Heavier and longer menstrual periods.
- Vaginal discharge.
- Vaginal bleeding or pain during intercourse or after menopause.
- Increased urinary frequency.

## Risk factors

- Failure to use protection during sexual intercourse.
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- Multiple sexual partners.
- Early sexual debut.
- Use of oral contraceptives.
- Furthermore, being overweight, inactive, consuming excess alcohol, poor dietary habits, smoking and exposure to chemicals increases the risk.
- Women with HIV infection also have a higher risk of developing cervical cancer.

## Reduce risk through Pap Smears

A Pap smear is not painful; it might be slightly uncomfortable, but this is a minor inconvenience against your lifetime risk of developing cervical cancer. Your doctor will explain the procedure to you, and before you know it, it is all over.

## About the PCR test

A test called the PCR on the Human Papilloma Virus can be done on the same specimen as the Pap smear, so you don't have to come in for another appointment. In addition, this test helps to detect abnormalities even before there is any sign of an abnormal or cancer cell. Thus, this test allows for improved outcomes when management thereof is planned in time and the first step in halting the possible development of cervical cancer.

Women who receive abnormal results must start with treatment as soon as possible as cervical cancer is highly treatable if caught early.

## Who should have a Pap smear?

- All sexually active women should start having Pap smears between ages 18 to 20 years.
- Every eligible woman should preferably have a Pap smear at least every three years.

Routine cervical screening is not required for women under 18 years, even if they are sexually active. Women 70 years and, within the last five years, had two normal Pap smears that do not have to continue.

## Reduce risk through vaccinations

All females in the age group of 9 – 26 years (provided they are not sexually active) may be vaccinated and should **continue** to screen for cervical cancer.

## We know what matters

Take charge of your health by working in partnership with your doctor to educate yourself on health issues and pay attention to your well-being. Intercare practitioners can perform a pap smear and are available for screening, prevention, and management.

Make a booking (Tab) link to the special interest page.

## References

Dr Ina de Beer, Intercare Woodhill Medical & Dental Centre

<https://cansa.org.za/cervical-cancer/https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/pap-smear/about/pac-20394841>

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