

Cervical Cancer Screening (Pap Test)

What is cervical cancer screening?

The Pap test is a cervical cancer screening procedure that can detect abnormal cells that may become cancerous on the cervix. The cervix is found at the top of the vagina and is the lowest part of the uterus. Cervical cancer typically develops slowly; screening for this cancer detects cells that could develop into cancer cells. People with abnormal cervical cells are at higher risk for the development of cervical cancer and may benefit from treatment to prevent or remove cancer.

When is cervical cancer screening recommended?

It's recommended that people with a cervix start cervical cancer screening at 21 years of age and repeat the test every 3 years. For people with a cervix who are between 30 to 65 years old, both a cervical cancer screening and a human papillomavirus (HPV) test are typically done together and repeated every 5 years. Factors that might increase the risk of having cervical cancer, such as having an HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) infection or a previous abnormal cervical cancer screening/Pap test result, may indicate the need for more frequent cervical cancer screenings.

What is involved in this type of procedure?

The procedure requires a person to be undressed from the waist down and covered with a light sheet. The health care provider will explain in detail how the cervical cancer screening will be done. The person having the cervical cancer screening test lies down on their back and places their feet into foot rests attached to the examination table. The provider will then use a light and a device, called a speculum, to look into the vagina. The two curved sides of the speculum separate slightly to allow the provider to see inside the vagina with the light and collect cells from the cervix with a small brush or swab. During this examination, a person may experience some pressure in the vagina and may be slightly uncomfortable. After the procedure, the cervical cells will be placed in a liquid and sent to the lab for evaluation. No change in normal daily activity is required before or after cervical cancer screening is performed.

If I get the HPV vaccine, does this mean I don't have to have to be screened for cervical cancer?

Because the HPV vaccine, Gardasil-9, does not protect against all strains of HPV-related to cancer and is not 100% effective, those with a cervix are advised to go to their medical provider for cervical cancer screening. The recommendations for cervical cancer screening are the same for people who did or did not receive the HPV vaccines.

How can I get cervical cancer screening at Medical Services?

Cervical cancer screening is often part of what is called a "Women's Health Annual" examination. Students may request this type of visit with Medical Services by scheduling an appointment online through the Columbia Health website, by calling, or in person at John Jay Hall to make an appointment. During the appointment, a health care provider will ask health and sexual history-related questions to recommend the most appropriate screenings; this may or may not include a screening for cervical cancer. Cervical cancer screenings are considered preventative care and are covered by most health insurance plans, including Columbia University Student Health Insurance plan, without additional fees or payments.

What else do I need to know about cervical cancer screening?

The screening procedure is considered safe. About seven days after the screening procedure, a health care provider will be in contact with the results of the screening, and more specifically, whether or not any abnormal cells were found. It is possible that if a sample of cervical cells taken during the screening was inadequate, a repeat test may be required to obtain a proper evaluation of the cells. Being tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is common during the same visit as a cervical cancer screening, but they are not the same type of screening. Talking with a provider will help determine specific and individual STI testing recommendations. While HPV is an STI and is associated with cervical cancer, testing for HPV is only recommended for those with a cervix who are older than 29 or for those who have had abnormal cervical cancer screening results. Further, testing for HPV is not the same as cervical cancer screening. Cervical cancer screening can be done at any time during the menstrual cycle, including during a menstrual period.

Online & Off-Campus Resources

Go Ask Alice!: goaskalice.columbia.edu

American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG)
Patient Information: acog.org/Clinical-Guidance-and-Publications/Patient-Education-FAQs-List

Columbia Student Health Insurance Plan Information:
health.columbia.edu/content/about-columbia-university-student-health-insurance-plan

On-Campus Resources

Medical Services: 212-854-7426
health.columbia.edu/medical-services

Gay Health Advocacy Project (GHAP): 212-854-6655
health.columbia.edu/GHAP

Columbia Health Insurance Office: 212-854-7210
health.columbia.edu/insurance

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