



# PAP TEST

FACT SHEET



## for YOUNG WOMEN

### What is a Pap test?

A Pap test is an important screening test which shows changes in the cells of the cervix that could lead to cancer. The cervix is the opening to the uterus. When a Pap test is done, some cells from the cervix are taken for examination.

### What do they do when I get a Pap test?

A Pap test is actually quite brief and simple! It involves...

- undressing from the waist down
- lying on an examination table in the doctor's office, you will place your feet or knees in "stirrups" located at the end of the table with your knees spread open so the genital area is easier to see
- a metal or plastic instrument, called a speculum, is gently inserted into the vagina so the cervix can be viewed
- a small wooden stick that looks like a Popsicle stick will be used to take a sample of the cells around your cervix. They may also use a small, soft brush that is about the size of a mascara wand to sample the cells around the cervical canal
- these cells are "smear" onto a glass slide that is then sent to the lab to be examined under a microscope for any precancerous changes

### Remember...

A Pap test should not cause you any pain. You might feel some pressure when the doctor inserts the speculum which will increase if you tense and resist the insertion of the speculum. Deep breathing will help make this procedure more comfortable for you.

### Why do I need regular Pap tests?

Regular Pap tests prevent over 90% of deaths from cervical cancer. You should start having regular Pap tests within 3 years of becoming sexually active or when you reach the age of 21.



**What do you mean by “sexually active”?**

You need regular Pap tests if you have ever had vaginal sexual activity, even once. That means vaginal intercourse, vaginal-oral sex, or vaginal-digital [digital=fingers] sex, or if you share sex toys or devices.

**Where can I get a Pap test?**

A Pap test can be performed by a family doctor or a specially trained nurse. If you're not comfortable with your doctor or don't have a family doctor, you can visit a Planned Parenthood Centre, get a referral from a youth health centre, speak to a friend about youth-friendly doctors, or call Doctors Nova Scotia.

**Is my Pap test confidential?**

YES. There is no age of consent for the provision of medical services to youth in Nova Scotia, so you can get a Pap test without a parent or guardian's knowledge or permission. If you are concerned your doctor will tell your parent or guardian, ask your doctor what their confidentiality policy is.

**Will they test me for STIs when I get my Pap test?**

Sometimes, but you need to ask to be certain. If you're sexually active, it's a good idea to go for routine STI testing.

**Does an abnormal Pap mean I have cancer?**

Not necessarily. An abnormal Pap means that there are some abnormal cervical cells that need to be looked at more closely. There are many possible reasons for abnormal cells, including an infection, hormonal changes or an abnormal growth of cells. Your doctor may recommend that you go for colposcopy to determine the reason for the abnormal results. A colposcope is a special microscope that gives the doctor a close up look at the cells around the cervix.

**How can I protect myself against cervical cancer?**

- have a regular Pap test
- choose not to have sexual contact or wait until you are older
- if you have sexual contact, practice safe sex and use latex condoms
- choose not to smoke
- limit number of sexual partners



For more  
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