

Changes to the Pap test and cervical screening



Cervical screening in Australia has changed. This fact sheet answers questions you might have about what the changes are, why the changes have occurred, and how they will affect you.

For more information, talk to your doctor or visit cancerinstitute.org.au/cervical

What are the changes?

From 1 December 2017:

- the Pap test was replaced by a new **Cervical Screening Test**
- women should have a Cervical Screening Test **every five years** instead of a Pap test every two years
- women will be invited to start screening at **age 25**.
- women should have a final (exit) test when they are **aged between 70 and 74**.
- Your first Cervical Screening Test is due **two years** after your last Pap test.

What is the difference between the Cervical Screening Test and the Pap test?

During a Pap test (also called a Pap smear), your doctor or nurse takes a sample of cells from your cervix. The sample is sent to a laboratory and viewed under a microscope to check for any changes or abnormalities in the cells. If the changes are left untreated, they may eventually lead to cervical cancer. The Pap test relies on cell changes being visible under a microscope, so it was recommended to have a Pap test every two years to look for recent changes.

During a Cervical Screening Test, a sample of cells is taken from your cervix in the same way it is for a Pap test. Instead of looking for cell changes in your cervix, however, the Cervical Screening Test looks for the types of human papillomavirus (HPV) which can cause cells to change and, in some cases, cause cervical cancer. HPV is the cause of more than 99% of cervical cancers.

If your Cervical Screening Test does not find HPV, your next Cervical Screening Test will be due in five years.

If HPV is found in your cells, the same sample is viewed under a microscope to see if the cells have changed or become abnormal. Your doctor will let you know the next steps based on the type of HPV you have and whether your cells have changed or not. You might need to have another Cervical Screening Test in 12 months, or you might need to have further tests within the next few weeks.

Why should I have cervical screening?

Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable cancers. The Cervical Screening Test looks for the infection that causes cervical cells to change (or become abnormal) so they can be treated before cervical cancer develops. Cervical screening is an important part of staying healthy.

If you ever have any symptoms, such as unusual bleeding or pain, see your doctor as soon as you can.

Why is cervical screening changing?

The changes are based on new evidence and better testing technology.

The Cervical Screening Test is more accurate than the Pap test, and we now have a much better understanding of how HPV causes cervical cancer. By looking for HPV, instead of the cell changes that HPV causes, up to 30 per cent fewer women are expected to be diagnosed with cervical cancer in Australia each year.²

What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a very common infection, which 80 per cent of people will have at some stage in their lives.¹ There are more than 100 types of HPV; with 40 types of HPV spread through sexual contact.

The Cervical Screening Test looks for types of HPV that can cause cancer. Most people will never know they have had HPV, as their immune system will have cleared the infection from their body without causing any issues.

While HPV is very common, cervical cancer is not common. Cervical cancer is a rare outcome of a HPV infection that doesn't clear up by itself. It usually takes 10 to 15 years for a HPV infection that doesn't clear up to develop into cervical cancer.

I've had the HPV vaccine, do I need to have cervical screening?

Yes, you do. The HPV vaccine protects against the types of HPV that cause the majority of cervical cancers, but not all of them, so you still need to have regular cervical screening.

Why has the age to start screening changed to 25?

Since the National Cervical Screening Program started in 1991, the number of women who have cervical abnormalities or cervical cancer has been closely monitored. This has found that screening women younger than 25 years every two years has not made an impact on preventing deaths from cervical cancer in this age group.

Cervical cancer is very rare in women younger than 25, but HPV is very common. Minor abnormal cell changes are also common; however, both HPV and minor abnormal cell changes usually clear up without needing treatment. Treating minor abnormal cell changes can increase the risk of complications during a later pregnancy, so by allowing these cell changes to clear up naturally, potential harm can be avoided.

The HPV vaccine offered to younger women has already reduced the number of cervical abnormalities, and will continue to reduce the risk of cervical abnormalities in this age group.

Five years seems like a long time between screening tests; is it safe to wait that long?

It is important to remember that the Cervical Screening Test is different to the Pap test—it is not the same test being offered less often. Screening every five years is for women who are told they do not have HPV. The new Cervical Screening Test is more accurate than a Pap test. The risk of developing cervical disease within five years after a HPV-negative result is very low.

It's important to remember that if you ever have any symptoms associated with changes to the cervical cells, such as unusual bleeding or pain, don't wait until your Cervical Screening Test is due. See your doctor as soon as you can.

What happens if my test shows I have HPV?

If your Cervical Screening Test shows that you have HPV, you won't wait five years for your next test. Based on the type of HPV you have, and whether your cervical cells have started to change, you will either be referred for further tests, or you will have a repeat test in 12 months.

When am I due to have a Cervical Screening Test?

- If you are aged between 24 and 69, and your last Pap test was normal, you will be due for your first Cervical Screening Test two years after your last Pap test. If this Cervical Screening Test shows you do not have HPV, you will be due for your next test five years later.
- If you are aged 23 or younger, and your last Pap test was normal, or if you haven't had a Pap test, you will be due for your first Cervical Screening Test around your 25th birthday. You will be sent a letter inviting you to book an appointment.
- If you are aged between 70 and 74, you will be invited to have a final test (called an 'exit' test). If you do not have HPV, you can stop screening.
- If you have had a Pap test before that showed abnormalities in the cells in your cervix, your doctor will continue to manage you based on your circumstances.
- If you are over 25 and have never had a Pap test, or haven't had a Pap test in the last two years, book an appointment with your doctor or nurse today.

Who needs to have cervical screening?

All women who have ever been sexually active should have regular cervical screening. This includes women who:

- are HPV vaccinated or unvaccinated
- haven't been sexually active for a long time
- have only had sex with one partner
- have only had sex with women.

HPV is passed on through genital skin-to-skin contact, so you don't need to have intercourse to be exposed to an infection.

