



Will I have a Pap Smear today?

A Patient Guide

In November 2009, several national health organizations put out new recommendations for Pap smears. These new recommendations made changes to when to start Pap smears, how often to have them done, and at what age you can stop doing Pap smear testing.

Why are these changes being recommended? Medical research and economic studies of testing costs and benefits seem to show that it may not be necessary to have Pap smears done every year. Cervical cancer, which is rare in women under 21 years of age, can still be picked up at the precancerous stage with less frequent pap smears in low risk populations.

To answer the question "Will I have a Pap smear done today?" you and your medical provider will need to figure out where you fit into these new guidelines. Important pieces of information needed to make this decision include:

- Your age
- When you had your last Pap smear and the result
- Whether you had treatment in the past for moderate or severe pre-cancer of the cervix
- Whether you have had a hysterectomy (and the reason for the hysterectomy)
- Whether you have a medical condition or take medications that decrease your immune system

Yearly pap smears may be needed depending on past medical history even if they are not needed by other women in your age group. For women who are relatively healthy, the NEW schedule of Pap smear testing is largely based on age:

- <21 years old- no Pap smear needed
- 21- 29 years old- Pap smears needed every 2 years
- 30- 64 years old- Pap smears needed every 3 years

It is really important for women to understand that even if a Pap smear is not needed- a pelvic exam at a yearly healthy woman's check may still be recommended. While many women think PELVIC EXAM = PAPER SMEAR, your provider has always been inspecting the outer genital area or vulva and the internal vaginal structures during the pelvic exam. An internal exam can be used to take vaginal or cervical samples to check for infections as well, such as sexually transmitted diseases (STD's). So, pelvic exam doesn't always mean pap smear.

Please make sure you feel comfortable that you understand whether a Pap smear is needed at today's visit - we're here to answer your questions.

The Olson Center for Women's Health