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AMERICAN ACADEMY OF  
FAMILY PHYSICIANS

## Get Pap tests—but only when you need them

**Pap tests look for cancers and pre-cancers in a woman's cervix. When caught early, cervical cancer is one of the most treatable forms of cancer.**

In the past, we thought that women needed a Pap test each year. Now we know that most women can get them less often.

### What happens during a Pap test

A Pap test takes samples of cells from the surface of your cervix. To reach those cells, your doctor uses a tool called a speculum. She will insert it gently into your vagina to hold it open. It takes about a minute. It can be uncomfortable. Sometimes you might bleed very lightly afterwards.

### Who needs Pap tests?

If you're 20 or younger, you're off the hook! If you're 21 or older, the details are below.

- **Women ages 21 to 29**
  - Get a Pap test every 3 years.
- **Women ages 30 to 65**
  - Get a Pap test and an HPV (human papillomavirus) test every 5 years.
- **Women ages 66 and older**
  - You don't need a Pap test unless you have a weak immune system – meaning you get infections more often than most people – or you have a history of cervical cancer or pre-cancer.
- **Women who don't have a cervix**
  - If your cervix was removed, you only need a Pap test if you have a history of cervical cancer or pre-cancer in your cervix.



## Your Pap test results

The cells from your cervix are sent to a lab. Then your doctor's office tells you the results. If the results show any abnormal cells, you may need a repeat test to confirm the results. Or, you might need a follow-up procedure called colposcopy.

## Avoid false alarms

To avoid a false alarm:

- Schedule your test for at least five days after your period stops.
- For two days before the test, don't have sex. And don't put anything else (such as tampons or gels) into your vagina.

## Paying for Pap tests

Under the Affordable Care Act, all insurance plans must pay for Pap tests.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment.

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## Advice from Consumer Reports

### Protect yourself from HPV and cervical cancer: Get the HPV vaccine

HPV stands for human papillomavirus. It's a sexually transmitted disease. HPV can cause cervical cancer and some other cancers.

The best way to protect yourself from HPV is to get the vaccine. The vaccine is given in three shots over six months. It's best to get it when you're 11 or 12 years old. But you can get it through age 26.

### Other ways to protect yourself from HPV

You can also protect yourself from HPV by:

- Using condoms and gels that kill sperm when you have sex.
- Having fewer sexual partners.

Women between 30 and 65 should get tested for HPV every 5 years.

### Other ways to protect yourself from cervical cancer

HPV causes most types of cervical cancer, but not all types. Here are some other ways to protect yourself from cervical cancer:

- If you smoke, quit.
- Stay away from other people's smoke.
- Keep getting the Pap tests you need (see "Who needs Pap tests").