

Pap tests - Q & A

Q. I recently had a curette performed. Does this mean I won't need a Pap test for another two years?

Often a Pap test is taken at the time a curette is performed. The reasons for your curette and results may impact the timing of your next Pap test. You should check with your doctor whether a Pap test was taken and discuss the date for your next one.

Q. When I went to get the Pill for the first time years ago, the doctor said I had to have an examination. He was really creepy and I've never wanted to go back again for a Pap test or anything like that. I live in a country town and we don't have a female doctor.

It is important that you feel comfortable with the person doing your Pap test. It can be difficult if you are in a small town that doesn't provide you with the options of other health care providers. You may want to check with your friends who they go to in your town or local area. Some women have their Pap tests taken when they go for a trip to a surrounding town to overcome this problem.

Check with your local community health service, as they often have nurses who can do Pap tests. The PapScreen Victoria website at www.papscreen.org.au can also help you find a test provider close to you. It is important that you continue to have two-yearly Pap tests, as this is the best way to pick up any changes to the cells of the cervix.

Q. I have been advised by my gynaecologist that taking the Pill may help my condition, but I'll need to be on it until I reach menopause. I am 34 years old and I am wondering about the risks of getting breast or cervical cancer, as there have been both in both sides of my family.

Certain 'high risk' types of the human papilloma virus (wart virus) are associated with the development of cervical cancer. Some studies also suggest that the long-term use of the oral contraceptive pill and cigarette smoking may also increase a woman's risk.

There are established risks for breast cancer. Examples of these include being a woman, increasing age and family history. Family history and risk would depend on who in your family has breast cancer and how young they were when they were diagnosed. Your doctor should be able to discuss your family history and give you an indication of your risk.

Research suggests that while women are taking oral contraceptives, and for 10 years after they stop, they have a slightly increased risk of breast cancer. If your doctor recommends you take the Pill, you may want to discuss with them the risks and benefits. You may decide to continue the Pill if the benefits outweigh any potential risk.

Q. Is it possible for a GP to conduct a Pap test on a home visit?

Most Pap tests would be done at a doctors' surgery or community health centre. However, it may be possible for you to organise with your doctor or nurse to have a Pap test at home if you are unable to attend. Discuss this with your doctor or nurse to see if it is possible.

Q. Do I still have to have Pap tests if I have had the cervical cancer vaccine?

A cervical cancer vaccine is now available for young women aged 9–26 years. This vaccine is most effective if given to girls around the ages of nine and 12, before they commence sexual activity. It protects against four strains of the human papilloma virus (HPV): two that cause around 70 per cent of cervical cancers, and two that cause around 90 per cent of genital warts. However, the vaccine will not protect you against all cancer-causing HPV types or those to which you may have already been exposed prior to vaccination.

All women aged 18–69 should continue with regular two yearly Pap tests, whether they have had the cervical cancer vaccine or not. The Pap test is currently the best protection against cervical cancer for women who have ever had sex.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Community health centre
- Family planning clinic
- The Cancer Helpline Tel. 131 120 (to find a local Victorian Pap test service) or go to www.papscreen.org.au

Want to know more?

Go to More information for support groups, related links and references.

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PapScreen Victoria - Cancer Council Victoria

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