



HPV Reflex Testing

Information for women¹ having Pap tests

About Pap tests

Pap tests check for changes in the cells of your cervix. These changes are important when they are the kind that could turn into cervical cancer over time. Women with these cell changes are followed and treated if needed so that cervical cancer does not develop. Hundreds of lives are saved every year in Alberta because of Pap tests.

What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is a common virus that spreads through sexual contact. This includes intimate touching, oral, vaginal and anal sex.

Most people will have an HPV infection at some point in their life and never know it. There are usually no symptoms. The majority of HPV infections do not cause any problems and are cleared by your body within 2 years.

But sometimes, certain HPV types do not clear on their own and can cause cells on your cervix to become abnormal. These abnormal cells may become cancer cells over time.

How does someone get HPV?

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) passes easily by skin-to-skin contact in the genital area. More than 7 out of every 10 sexually active people will get HPV in their lifetime. HPV can spread by touching, oral sex, or intercourse with a partner of either sex. Because there are no symptoms, most people do not know they are passing HPV to their partner. HPV is so common that most people get it soon after they become sexually active.

Will my Pap test sample be tested for HPV?

If you're between the ages of 30 and 49 and your Pap test shows cell changes that are hard for the lab to read, your Pap test sample will be tested for HPV. This is called HPV reflex testing. In this age group, infection with high-risk HPV are less likely to clear. This increases the risk of developing cervical cancer in the future.

HPV reflex testing is not as useful for women younger than 30. This is because HPV is more common among younger women and will usually clear on its own. In this age group, HPV testing does not help in deciding who needs follow-up care.

¹ Women and anyone with a cervix

What if HPV is not found?

If your results show that you do not have HPV, you won't need any follow-up tests. Your risk of developing cervical cancer over the next few years is about the same as women who have a normal Pap test result. However, it's important to continue having Pap tests regularly.

What if HPV is found?

If your results show that you have HPV, it means the changes seen in your cervical cells were most likely caused by a high-risk type of HPV. Your healthcare provider will refer you to a specialist for a colposcopy.

A colposcopy is a procedure that looks for any abnormal changes on your cervix and vagina. A specialist (colposcopist) will use a magnifying tool called a colposcope. A colposcope allows the specialist to get a close-up look at your cervix. The test takes around 10 minutes, and you can go home right after it's done.

Having the virus doesn't mean that you or your partner were unfaithful. The virus can hide in your body for years without any sign that it's there. You or your partner may have been infected long before you became a couple.

What if I've had the HPV vaccine?

You should still have Pap tests regularly even if you've had the HPV vaccine. This is because the vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV that cause cervical cancer.

The lab will do an HPV reflex test on your sample, if needed.



How will I receive my Pap test and HPV results?

There are a few different ways you may get your results:

- You may hear from your primary healthcare provider.
- You can contact your healthcare provider if you haven't heard from them already.
- You can view your test results online through the [MyHealthAlberta MyChart](#). Sign up for MyChart by creating a verified Alberta.ca account.
 - If you have an abnormal or unsatisfactory result, you may also receive notice from the screening program.

Where can I learn more?

For more information, talk to your healthcare provider or visit screeningforlife.ca/cervical.

Contact us

Primary Care Alberta Screening Programs

1-866-727-3926

Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 pm