

Pelvic Exams: what happens?

One of the ways to get more comfortable with the pelvic exam is to know what is going to happen before you get to your appointment. The point of the Pap Smear is merely to check for abnormal cervical cells.

You will be asked to undress and get on the table. You will need to bend your knees, with your feet together and let your legs go floppy. BREATHE.

The practitioner will check out your vulva and the surrounding areas for colouring, discharge, and anything that does not seem normal for you.

This is where the speculum is introduced. While many women may believe that a speculum is a type of torture device, it is actually a tool used to hold the vaginal canal open so the practitioner can see your cervix. Then they will lube you up and slowly insert the thin beak-like speculum into your vagina. BREATHE.

Once the speculum is inserted, the practitioner slowly opens the speculum just enough for them to get a clear view of your cervix. They take a couple swabs of the cervical cells, place the cells on a lens to send to the lab, and slowly take out the speculum. BREATHE.

What is the pap smear register?

The register keeps a confidential history of your Pap smear results and sends you a reminder if you are overdue for your next smear. Results of your smear are automatically sent to the register. If you do not wish to have your details forwarded to the register you can tell your health professional at the time of the smear.

For further information contact: 1800 777 790

For more information about STIs apart from HPV and practicing safer sex, please visit www.qahc.org.au/lesbian.

Resources

- Healthy Communities – Lesbian Health
Phone: 30171777
womenshealth@qahc.org.au
www.qahc.org.au/lesbian
- Women's Health Queensland Wide
- Health Information Line
(07) 3839 9988
1800 017 676 (toll free outside Brisbane)
www.womhealth.org.au
- Family Planning Queensland
(07) 3250 0240
www.fpq.com.au
- Health Quality and Complaints Commission
(07) 3120 5999
1800 077 308 (toll free outside Brisbane)
www.hqcc.qld.gov.au
- Queensland Health Pap Smear Register
1800 777 790

The Lesbian Health Action Group would like to acknowledge the following sources of information, to read more go to:

- www.bookshop.qld.gov.au
- www.womhealth.org.au
-
- www.lesbianhealthinfo.org
-
- www.health.wa.gov.au
-
- www.girl2girl.info

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Looking After Your Cervix



Lesbian Health
Action Group



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What causes cervical cancer?

The cause of almost all cancer of the cervix is long term infection caused by some types of human papillomavirus (HPV). There are over 100 types of HPV affecting various parts of the body but only a few are linked to cancer of the cervix. Most women with HPV will not develop cancer of the cervix. In most cases the body's immune system will clear the virus in one to two years. Increasing age, smoking and lowered immunity are also linked with a greater risk of developing cancer of the cervix.

What does it mean if I have HPV?

Exposure to HPV can be considered a normal part of being a sexually active person. Most women only become aware of the fact that they have HPV when they have an abnormal Pap smear result or if genital warts appear. In a small number of women HPV stays in the cells of the cervix. If HPV is not cleared there is an increased risk of cancer of the cervix developing. This usually takes a long time – often more than 10 years.

Other risk factors for cervical cancer

- Age: about half of the new cases of cervical cancer diagnosed each year are in women over 50 years of age
- Smoking: women who smoke are known to be at greater risk of developing cervical cancer than non-smokers
- Persistent HPV infection
- Not having a Pap smear every two years!

Tips for having a cervical screen

- 1 You do not have to have anyone in the room that you do not want there. This means that if you want a female doctor, you cannot be forced to see a man, and vice versa. You also do not have to agree to have a specific person assisting the doctor or clinician. You can refuse to have any particular person in the room for any reason.
- 2 None of the clinic staff should be present while you are undressing or while you're putting your clothes back on.
- 3 You may watch what is happening through a mirror, if you want to, and you are not required to keep a sheet over your legs so that you cannot see what is happening.
- 4 Anyone who touches your genitals must wear gloves. If you are allergic to latex, you need to inform the clinician so that they can use latex-free gloves.
- 5 You may ask the clinician to tell you exactly what he or she is doing throughout the exam. If it is your first visit, the clinician must do this.
- 6 You are free to ask questions at any time.
- 7 The clinicians must do any tests on you that you ask for, as long as they are capable of performing these tests.
- 8 You may bring a family member, partner, or friend to support you during the exam.
- 9 You do not have to do anything you don't want to do.
- 10 You deserve to be listened to, and are free to tell the clinician what would make you most comfortable. (i.e. you can ask that they take more time, go more slowly, stop to allow you to relax, etc.).
- 11 You can stop the exam at any time.
- 12 If at any time the clinician does anything that makes you uncomfortable, you can leave.
- 13 If it is your first exam, tell your doctor or nurse practitioner beforehand. They may go more slowly and explain more about what they are doing
- 14 Another way to become more comfortable with the exam is to ask a friend, family member or partner if you may accompany them to their next exam so that you can see someone else go through it first.
- 15 The vagina is one big muscle so the more you breathe and relax, the easier it will be for you and the clinician. It should not hurt so if you find it really uncomfortable, take some deep breaths and relax your muscles. Talking also relaxes the pelvic muscles, so chat to your clinician while having the smear.

Pelvic Exams

The last part of the exam is the bimanual exam. The practitioner uses their hands to examine you. With gloved hands, they will insert two fingers from one hand into your vagina until they are touching your cervix. Gently, they will jiggle your cervix a little so that, with their other hand on your belly, they can feel your uterus. They are checking for size, tenderness, and anything else that does not feel normal for you. This allows them to feel for your ovaries as well.

After the bimanual exam, any last discussions will happen and then the practitioner will leave you to get dressed. The whole exam takes about five minutes. Congratulations, you are done!



healthy cervix

unhealthy cervix

HPV Vaccination

The HPV vaccine is given as a series of 3 injections into the upper arm muscle. It should be given within a 6 month period, for example:

- First dose – chosen date
- Second dose – 2 months after the first dose
- Third dose within 4 months of the second dose.

The vaccine is most effective when all 3 doses have been given. Missed doses should be given as soon as possible.

See your local GP for more information.

Once you have had vaccination however, it does not mean you need to avoid Pelvic exams!