

Pap Smears

by Elizabeth Morgan Walsh, M.D.

Pap smears are a critical part of a woman's health care and should be initiated at age 21. Cervical cancer incidence has decreased greater than 50% due to the widespread use of pap smears. Furthermore, approximately half of all women who are diagnosed with cervical cancer have never had a pap and an additional 10% of women with cervical cancer did not have a pap in the 5 years prior to their diagnosis. This test is essentially a red flag raiser. An abnormal pap does not tell us how extensive a cervical problem is. It does tell us that further testing needs to be done to make certain cervical cancer or pre-cancer is not present. This next test is a colposcopy which allows for better visualization of the cervix and biopsy of abnormal areas. Cervical cancer and precancerous cells are caused by a very common sexually transmitted virus, Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). This virus has the potential to cause damage to cervical cells, yet if that damage occurs it generally occurs relatively slowly starting with mild abnormality that then worsens over time. The goal of a pap smear is to catch pre-cancer cells so that they can be removed to prevent the development of cancer.

Having one pap smear is not enough for lifelong cancer surveillance. This is due to the fact that a pap can be falsely normal. For this reason yearly pap smears have traditionally been recommended. A series of normal paps statistically takes away the risk of having a falsely normal pap. Recent research has changed this yearly recommendation by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. A lady who has always had normal paps, has the same sexual partner, and has no chronic illnesses that affect the function of the immune system can space her paps to every two years in her twenties and to every three years in her thirties and beyond. It is important to note that these new recommendations are for the pap test only. Every woman still needs to be seen for a yearly gynecological exam to evaluate the breast, uterus, ovaries, and her overall health.

The annual gyn exam and pap smear does often lead to a great deal of anxiety for women. I feel that it is important for women to know that they are not alone in that common anxiety. It is our job as providers to make the experience of the annual exam as free of stress as possible to enable our patients to effectively utilize preventive measures such as the pap smear.

Elizabeth Morgan Walsh, M.D.