



Information about Colposcopy

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What is an abnormal Pap smear?

The cervix is located at the opening of the uterus. The surface cells on the cervix are constantly growing and changing. Sometimes, these cells become abnormal. The Pap test screens for these abnormal cells.

Abnormal cells are called dysplasia (plasia means growth). In rare cases, if left untreated, dysplasia may progress to cervical cancer.

Cervical cells can go through many changes that are not cancer. These changes can be caused by many things, and will most often return to normal on their own.



What is HPV?

HPV is a very common virus and is the most common cause of dysplasia. There are more than 100 types of HPV. Some cause only temporary changes in cervical cells, other types can cause genital warts, and still others, cervical cancer.

Most of the time, the immune system will clear HPV infection on its own. In some cases, however, the body is not able to clear HPV and abnormal cells will persist.

The good news is that regular Pap tests allow us to detect cell changes early so that we can treat them before they become a problem.



How is HPV passed on?

HPV can be passed from person to person by genital skin contact alone. Vaginal sex is not necessary for transmission, and condoms do not completely prevent transmission of HPV. This is because HPV is present on surrounding genital skin that may not be covered by a condom.

Condoms will prevent transmission of other infections, such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HIV.

HPV is transmitted mostly by sexual partners who may have no signs or symptoms. Many people have the virus but do not know it. This is one reason why HPV is so common. It is estimated that 75% of Canadians will have an HPV infection at some point in their lives.





The HPV Vaccine

There is a vaccine for HPV. The one currently available in Canada is called Gardasil, and it can help protect you against future HPV infection. This vaccine protects against four types of HPV, which cause 70% of cervical cancers and 90% of genital warts. The HPV vaccine will not cure your existing HPV infection, but it will protect you from getting a new type of HPV.

Although research is limited to women under 26, we recommend vaccination for women of all ages. The HPV vaccine can protect you even if you are already sexually active. It can even protect you if you have already had an abnormal Pap result or HPV infection.



What is colposcopy?

Colposcopy is a way of examining the cervix under magnification. A speculum, the same instrument used during Pap test, is inserted into the vagina to allow us to see the cervix.

A vinegar solution is applied to the cervix. This solution does not hurt and causes abnormal cells to turn white. If abnormal areas are seen, a sample (or biopsy) can be taken of those areas. The biopsy is then sent to a lab for further testing; this allows us to determine the level of abnormality (ie: if you have low grade or high grade dysplasia).

A colposcopy exam does not substitute for your yearly checkup by your family doctor. It does not check for infections such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, or HIV. It does not check for problems such as fibroids or ovarian cysts.



Care after colposcopy

No special care is necessary after a colposcopy. If you had a biopsy, you may experience vaginal spotting for one to two days. The solution that is used to decrease spotting may also cause a black-ish discharge. A light pad may be used for any bleeding you experience. You should also avoid vaginal sex for two days after biopsy.





What can I do to stay healthy?

Follow-up is very important to detect recurrence of abnormal cells. You should continue to have Pap tests, colposcopies, and other treatments as recommended by your health care team.

Your body is more likely to clear the virus over time if your immune system is strong and healthy. A healthy lifestyle, including eating a healthy diet and getting enough sleep, is very important.

The factors that seem to have the most impact on future risk are things that you can control. They are:

- **Smoking cigarettes.** It is very difficult to clear HPV from the cervix if you smoke even one cigarette a day. For those who smoke, this can be a great incentive to quit. You can discuss how you can cut down or quit smoking with your doctor or nurse.
- **Sexual partners.** Limiting the number of sexual partners you have greatly decreases your risk of exposure to HPV. Also, using condoms during sex or genital contact is a good way to reduce your chances of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI), although condoms are not 100% effective at preventing infection.



How do I get my results?

Please make sure that you have given us a reliable contact number or email address. We will contact you when we have received your results.

*If you have any questions or concerns, please call the Colposcopy Clinic at
416-351-3720 ext. 2170*

Leave a message indicating the best time to reach you, and we will return your call as soon as possible.

It is important that you have your follow-up appointment when you do not have your period (or are having only light bleeding). You should also avoid using tampons and having sexual intercourse for 48 hours before your appointment.

For more information:

- www.hpvinfos.ca
- www.sexualityandu.ca
- www.smokershelpline.ca
- www.gardasil.ca

