

## KNOW THE FACTS

- Cervical cancer is caused by a common virus called HPV. Anyone who ever had sex can get HPV.
- Cervical cancer can be prevented with regular screening tests and follow-up care.
- The Pap test—either alone or with the HPV test—is the best way to find early signs of cervical cancer.
- If you get an abnormal test result, be sure to follow up as told by your doctor.
- Most women who get abnormal Pap test results or who have HPV do not get cervical cancer—as long as they follow their doctor’s advice for more tests or treatment.

For more information, call  
**1-800-CDC-INFO** (1-800-232-4636)  
or visit [www.cdc.gov/std/hpv](http://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv) or  
[www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/)



## Making Sense of Your Pap and HPV Test Results



Keep this booklet until you get  
your test results back from  
your doctor.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention





This booklet is for women who got screened for cervical cancer with a Pap test and an HPV test. It will help answer common questions about:

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Getting abnormal results does not mean that you have cervical cancer now. For specific questions about your test results, talk to your doctor.

**See pages 16-17 for definitions of bolded words.**

**Genitals** (JEN-i-tl-z): The reproductive organs, especially the external sex organs.

**HPV** or human papillomavirus (pap-ah-LO-mah-VYE-rus): A very common virus that infects the skin cells. There are many types of HPV. About 40 types, called genital HPV, affect the genital areas of men and women. Some of these types can cause cervical cancer in women. Other types can cause genital warts in men and women.

**HPV test:** A DNA test that looks for HPV on a woman’s cervix. Doctors take DNA cells by swabbing the cervix. This is often done at the same time as a Pap test.

**Inconclusive** (in-kuh n-kloo-siv): A Pap test result that is unclear. Your doctor may also use the term “ASC-US” to describe this result.

**Pap test:** Screening test that looks for early signs of cervical cancer. It finds abnormal cells on a woman’s cervix. For this test, your doctor takes cells from your cervix so that they can be looked at with a microscope. The Pap test is often done at the same time as a *pelvic exam* (see below).

**Pelvic exam** (PEL-vik ex-am): Exam to check the female reproductive organs. This exam is part of a woman’s routine health care visit. Your doctor will look at the outside of your genitals, or sex organs, to look for problems. Your doctor will also look at and feel your internal organs—such as your vagina, cervix, ovaries, and womb.

**Prevent:** Avoid or stop from getting.

**Pre-cancer:** Cell changes that are not normal, but have not yet turned into cancer.

**Screening test:** Getting tested for early signs of disease so the problem can be treated before the disease ever develops. Cancer screening tests look for early signs of cancer so you can take steps to avoid ever getting cancer. The Pap and HPV tests screen for early signs of cervical cancer.

**Uterus** (YOO-tuh-rus): The uterus, or womb, holds a growing baby and helps push the baby out during labor.

**Virus** (VYE-rus): Something that lives in the body and can cause infections. Viruses are so small that they cannot even be seen with a regular microscope.

**Abnormal Pap test** (ab-NOR-mal): A finding that is not normal. An abnormal result means that your cervix has cell changes. Your doctor may use medical terms to describe these results. You may hear that your result came back as “LSIL” or “HSIL”. LSIL stands for “low-grade squamous intra-epithelial lesions” — which means minor cell changes on the cervix. HSIL stands for “high-grade squamous intra-epithelial lesions” — which means more serious cell changes. Abnormal results do not mean you have cervical cancer. But you need to follow up as told by your doctor.

**ASC-US** (ASK-us): This word stands for “Atypical Squamous Cells of Undetermined Significance.” Doctors may use this word to describe a Pap test result that is unclear. Your doctor may also use words like “equivocal” or “inconclusive” to describe this result (see below).

**Biopsy** (BUY-op-SEE): Your doctor uses this test to study abnormal cells. A small piece of tissue is taken from your cervix and checked under a microscope.

**Cancer** (KAN-ser): A disease that starts when cells in the body turn abnormal and begin to grow out of control. Abnormal cells begin in one part of the body and can spread to other body parts. When they spread, the damaged cells replace normal cells. There are many types of cancer. Cancers are named based on where the abnormal cells first started growing. Cervical cancer is when the abnormal cells begin in the cervix.

**Cells:** The basic unit that makes up all living things.

**Cervix** (SUR-viks): The part of the womb (or uterus) that opens to the vagina.

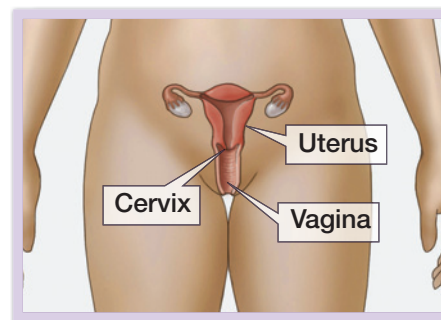
**Colposcopy** (kol-POS-coe-pee): A method your doctor can use to magnify the cervix to see any abnormal cells.

**Equivocal** (ee-QUIV-o-kal): A Pap test result that is unclear. Your doctor may also use the term “ASC-US” to describe this result.

**Follow-up:** Going back to see your doctor for more testing or treatment.

## What is cervical cancer?

**Cancer** can grow on a woman’s cervix—the same way it can grow on other body parts. Most times, cervical cancer forms slowly. Cervical cancer often does not cause symptoms until it is advanced. When cervical cancer is advanced, it may cause abnormal bleeding, discharge, or pain.



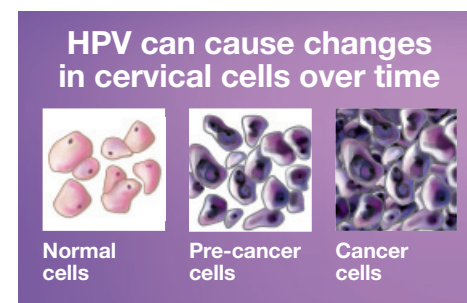
The cervix is the opening of your **uterus** (womb). It is part of a woman’s reproductive system.

## What causes cervical cancer?

A **virus**, called **genital human papillomavirus** (pap-ah-LO-mah-VYE-rus)—also just called HPV—can cause normal cells on your cervix to turn abnormal. Over many years, abnormal cells can turn into cancer if they are not found and treated by your doctor. It can take 10 to 15 years (or more) for cells to change from normal to

abnormal, and then into cancer. Abnormal cells are sometimes called “**pre-cancer**” because they are not normal, but they are not yet cancer.

You cannot see or feel HPV or these cell changes on your cervix.



## What is cervical cancer screening?

**Screening tests** can find early problems before you get sick. The **Pap test** is a screening test for cervical cancer. It looks for abnormal **cells** on your **cervix** that could turn into cancer over time. That way, problems can be found and treated before they ever turn into cancer. An **HPV test** may also be used with the Pap test.

If you’re reading this booklet, you have taken the first step to **prevent** cervical cancer by getting screened.

Every year in the United States, about 10,000 women get cervical cancer. But it is the most preventable female cancer with regular screening tests and early treatment.



## What is HPV?

HPV is a common virus. There are about 40 types of HPV that can infect the **genitals** or sex organs of men and women. HPV is so common that most people get it at some time in their lives. But HPV usually causes no symptoms so you can't tell that you have it.

## What can HPV do to my body?

HPV can infect the genital areas in different ways:

- Some HPV types can cause changes on a woman's cervix that can lead to cervical cancer over time.
- Other HPV types can cause genital warts in men and women.\* But the HPV types that can cause genital warts are different from the types that can cause cervical cancer.

Most of the time, HPV goes away by itself within two years and does not cause health problems. It is thought that the immune system fights off HPV naturally. Experts do not know why HPV goes away in most, but not all cases. It is only when HPV stays on a woman's cervix for many years that it can cause cervical cancer.

## How could I get HPV?

HPV is passed on through genital (skin to skin) contact, most often during vaginal or anal sex. Most people never even know they have HPV, or that they are passing it to their partner. So it may not be possible to know who gave you HPV or when you got it. HPV is so common that most people get it soon after they start having sex. And it may only be found years later.

All women who ever had sex are at risk for HPV and cervical cancer.

HPV is NOT the same as HIV (the AIDS virus) or herpes. All of these viruses can be passed on during sex. But they do not cause the same symptoms or health problems.

\* For information about genital warts, see [www.cdc.gov/std/hpv](http://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv) or [www.ashastd.org/hpv/hpv\\_learn\\_warts.cfm](http://www.ashastd.org/hpv/hpv_learn_warts.cfm)

## ■ Federally Qualified Health Centers

To find a local clinic, go to <http://ask.hrsa.gov/pc/>

## ■ Title X-Funded Family Planning Clinics

To find a family planning clinic in your region, state, or territory, click on <http://opa.osophs.dhhs.gov/titex/ofp-service-grantees.html>

## ■ National Cancer Institute (NCI)

To find out where else you can get free or low-cost screening and **follow-up** care, call 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). 1-800-332-9615 (TTY).

## ■ Planned Parenthood

1-800-230-PLAN (1-800-230-7526)

To find a local health center, visit [www.plannedparenthood.org/](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/)

## ■ National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association

To find a local clinic, visit [www.nfprha.org](http://www.nfprha.org) and click on [Clinics near you](#)

## Learn More

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)

Cervical Cancer homepage [www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/)

HPV homepage [www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/](http://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/)

### American Cancer Society (ACS)

1-800-ACS-2345 (1-800-227-2345)

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

### American Social Health Association (ASHA)

1-877-HPV-5868 (877-748-5868)

[www.ashastd.org/hpv/hpv\\_overview.cfm](http://www.ashastd.org/hpv/hpv_overview.cfm)

### Association of Reproductive Health Professionals (ARHP)

(202) 466-3825

[www.arhp.org](http://www.arhp.org)

## Free or Low-Cost Cervical Cancer Screening and Follow-up Tests

**You may be able to get cervical cancer screening and follow-up tests for free or at low cost if you:**

- **have health insurance.** If you have questions about coverage, talk to your insurance company.
- **are eligible for Medicaid.** To learn more, call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227). You can also find your nearest Medicaid office by visiting the U.S. Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services at [www.cms.hhs.gov/RegionalOffices/](http://www.cms.hhs.gov/RegionalOffices/)
- **are age 65 or older.** Medicare pays for the Pap test every 2 years, or every year for some women. To learn more about Medicare's Pap test coverage, call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227). The call is free and you can speak to someone in English or Spanish.
- **have a low income or do not have health insurance.**

**To find out if you can get free or low-cost tests and where to go, call or visit:**

- **Your state or local health department**  
To find your state health department, visit:  
[www.cdc.gov/mmwr/international/relres.html](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/international/relres.html)  
To find your local health department, visit:  
[http://healthguideusa.org/local\\_health\\_departments.htm](http://healthguideusa.org/local_health_departments.htm)
- **CDC's National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program**  
To find local or state programs:  
Call 1-888-842-6355 (choose option 7)  
Visit [www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp) — click on [Find a Local Program](#)

## Cervical Cancer Screening Tests

You can prevent cervical cancer with regular screening tests, like the Pap test. An HPV test can also be used with the Pap test. These tests are often done at the same time.

**Since cervical cancer often does not cause symptoms until it is advanced, it is important to get screened even when you feel healthy.**

**The Pap and HPV tests look for different things:**

### The Pap test

Checks your cervix for abnormal cells that could turn into cervical cancer.

### The HPV Test

Checks your cervix for the virus (HPV) that can cause abnormal cells and cervical cancer.

**The Pap and HPV tests can find early problems that could lead to cervical cancer over time. These tests do NOT:**

- Check for early signs of other cancers
- Check your fertility (ability to get pregnant)
- Check for all HPV types – There are many types of HPV. The HPV test only checks for specific HPV types that are linked to cervical cancer
- Check for other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

**Do experts recommend getting the HPV test with the Pap test?**

The HPV test is not recommended by all expert organizations. But some organizations do recommend it for certain women if:

- You are 21 years or older and your Pap test result is unclear (see page 5), or
- You are 30 years or older.

You don't need to ask your doctor for an HPV test. Your doctor should offer you an HPV test if you need it and it is available in their practice.

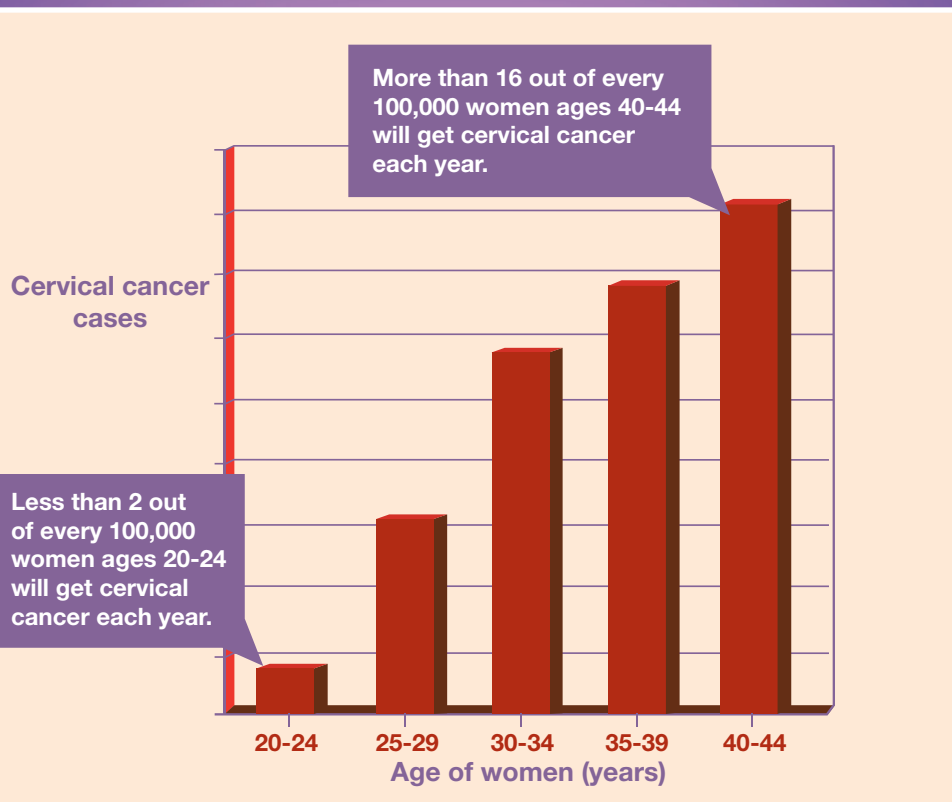
## Why is the HPV test NOT recommended for younger women and teens?

HPV is very common in women under age 30. But it is not useful to test young women for HPV, since most HPV that is found in these women will never cause them health problems. Most young women will fight off HPV within a few years.

HPV is less common in women over the age of 30. HPV is also more likely to signal a health problem for these women, who may have had the virus for many years. Doctors may use the HPV test to tell if these women are more likely to get cervical cancer in the future, and if they need to be screened more often.

Getting regular Pap tests, even without the HPV test, is still a good way to prevent cervical cancer—for both younger and older women.

In the U.S., cervical cancer is rare in women in their 20s. It is much more common in women over 30.



## Can my male partner get tested for HPV?

Right now, there is no HPV test for men. HPV is just as common in men as in women, but it is easier to find in women. The types of HPV that put you at risk for cervical cancer rarely cause health problems for most men.



## I heard about an HPV vaccine. Can it help me?

An HPV vaccine is now recommended for 11-12 year-old girls. It is also recommended for women up to age 26 if they did not get the vaccine when they were younger. The vaccine protects against the HPV types that cause most cervical cancers and genital warts. But it does not treat existing HPV, cervical cell changes, or genital warts. It will be most effective in females who have not yet had sex since they are unlikely to have HPV. The vaccine has recently been tested with women older than 26 years. It may one day be available to these women, if it is found to be safe and effective for them. Even women who got the vaccine when they were younger need regular cervical cancer screening because the vaccine does not protect against all cervical cancers.

## If I've had a hysterectomy, do I still need to get screened for cervical cancer?

This depends on why you got your hysterectomy, and if you still have your cervix. If you got a total hysterectomy for reasons other than cancer, you may not need cervical cancer screening. Talk to your doctor to find out if you still need to get screened.



## Common Questions about HPV

### Is there a treatment for HPV or abnormal cells?

There is no treatment for HPV (a virus). But there are treatments for abnormal cervical cells, which can be killed or removed. Treating abnormal cells will stop them from growing into cancer. But it may not remove the virus (HPV). That's why it's important to go back to your doctor as told, to make sure abnormal cells do not grow back. You may need to get Pap tests more often for a while. But most people do eventually fight the virus off.

### Does having HPV or abnormal cervical cells affect my chances of getting pregnant or having healthy babies?

Having HPV or cell changes on your cervix does not make it harder to get or stay pregnant. The type of HPV that is linked to cancer should not affect the health of your future babies. But if you need treatment for your cell changes, the treatment could affect your chance of having babies, in rare cases. If you need treatment, ask

your doctor if the treatment can affect your ability to get pregnant or have a normal delivery.

### Will I pass HPV to my current partner?

If you have been with your partner for a while, your partner likely has HPV too. But your partner likely has no signs or symptoms of HPV. Partners usually share HPV, until your bodies fight it off naturally. There is no way to know if your partner gave you HPV, or if you gave HPV to your partner.

### Can I prevent passing HPV to a new partner?

Condoms may lower your chances of passing HPV to your new partner, if used all the time and the right way. But HPV can infect areas that are not covered by a condom—so condoms may not fully protect against HPV. The only sure way to prevent passing HPV to a new partner is to not have sex.



## What Does My Pap Test Result Mean?

Your Pap test will come back as either “normal,” “unclear,” or “abnormal.”

### Normal

A normal (or “negative”) result means that no cell changes were found on your cervix. This is good news. But you still need to get Pap tests in the future. New cell changes can still form on your cervix.

### Unclear

It is common for test results to come back unclear. Your doctor may use other words to describe this result, like: **equivocal**, **inconclusive**, or **ASC-US**. These all mean the same thing: that your cervical cells look like they *could* be abnormal. It is not clear if it's related to HPV. It could be related to life changes like pregnancy, menopause, or an infection. The HPV test can help find out if your cell changes are related to HPV.

### Abnormal

An abnormal result means that cell changes were found on your cervix. This usually does not mean that you have cervical cancer.

Abnormal changes on your cervix are likely caused by HPV. The changes may be minor (low-grade) or serious (high-grade). Most of the time, minor changes go back to normal on their own. But more serious changes can turn into cancer if they are not removed. The more serious changes are often called “pre-cancer” because they are not yet cancer, but they can turn into cancer over time. It is important to make sure these changes do not get worse.

In rare cases, an **abnormal Pap test** can show that you may have cancer. You will need other tests to be sure. The earlier you find cervical cancer, the easier it is to treat.

If your Pap test results are unclear or abnormal, you will likely need more tests so your doctor can tell if your cell changes could be related to cancer. See page 9 for more information.

It is estimated that each year in the U.S., over 3,000,000 women get unclear or abnormal Pap tests.

■ About 10,000 of these women will actually have cervical cancer.

**Most women with unclear or abnormal Pap tests do not have cancer. But many of these women may have abnormal cells that need to be treated so that they do not turn into cancer in the future. Be sure to follow your doctor's advice for more tests or treatment.**

## Making Sense of Your Pap and HPV Test Results

It can be confusing to get your Pap and HPV test results at the same time.

**Your HPV test will come back as either “positive” or “negative”:**

- A **negative HPV test** means you do not have an HPV type that is linked to cervical cancer.
- A **positive HPV test** means you do have an HPV type that may be linked to cervical cancer. This does not mean you have cervical cancer now. But it could be a warning.

HPV test results are only meaningful **WITH** your Pap test results. To understand what these tests mean together:

- **If your HPV test is negative (normal), see page 7.**
- **If your HPV test is positive (abnormal), see page 8.**



“I see my doctor each year for a Pap test. This year, my doctor told me the test was abnormal. He also said I have HPV. I was confused. What does this mean?”



### How do I talk to my partner about HPV?

You and your partner may benefit from talking openly about HPV. You can tell your partner that:

- HPV is very common. It can infect the genital areas of both men and women. It usually has no signs or symptoms and goes away on its own.
- Most sexually active people get HPV at some time in their lives, though most will never know it. Even people with only one lifetime sex partner can get HPV, if their partner had it.
- There is no test yet for men to find out if they have HPV. But the most common health problem caused by HPV in men is genital warts. The type of HPV found on your



HPV test can cause cervical cancer in women; it does not cause genital warts.

- Partners who have been together for a while tend to share HPV. This means that your partner likely has HPV already, even though your partner may have no signs or symptoms.
- Having HPV does not mean that you or your partner is having sex outside of your relationship. There is no sure way to know when you got HPV or who gave it to you. A person can have HPV for many years before it is found.

If your sex partner is female, you should talk to her about the link between HPV and cervical cancer, and encourage her to get a Pap test to screen for cervical cancer.



## What else can I do to prevent cervical cancer?

- Keep your next doctor's appointment. Mark your calendar or post a note on your fridge, so you remember it.
- Go back for more testing or treatment if your doctor tells you to.
- Keep getting regular Pap tests—at least once every three years.
- Do not smoke. Smoking harms all of your body's cells, including your cervical cells. If you smoke and have HPV, you have higher chances of getting cervical cancer. If you smoke, ask your doctor for help quitting.



## Questions To Ask Your Doctor

- How do I know if I got an HPV test?
- When and how should I expect to get my test results?
- What do my test results mean?
- What other tests or treatment will I need if my Pap or HPV test is abnormal?
  - When do I need to come back for more testing or treatment?
  - What should I expect during and after these tests or treatments?
  - Are there risks or side effects?
  - Will the testing or treatment affect my chance to get or stay pregnant?
  - Will the added tests or treatment be covered by my insurance?
  - Where can I get help to cover the costs?
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**Be sure to ask your doctor about anything you don't understand.**

## If your HPV test is Negative (normal), and your Pap test is...

### Pap test is Normal

#### This means:

- you do not have HPV
- your cervical cells are normal
- you have a very low chance of getting cervical cancer in the next few years.

#### You should:

- wait three years before getting your next Pap and HPV test
- ask your doctor when to come in for your next visit.

Experts used to suggest yearly Pap tests. But now you can wait longer because having the HPV test with your Pap test gives you extra peace of mind.

### Pap test is Unclear (ASC-US)

#### This means:

- you do not have HPV, but your Pap test was unclear
- even if you do have cell changes, it is unlikely that they are caused by HPV (or related to cervical cancer).

#### You should:

- get another Pap test in a year just to be sure. You may also get an HPV test at that time.

### Pap test is Abnormal

#### This means:

- your Pap test found abnormal cells
- your HPV test did not find HPV.

It's important to find out why the two tests are showing different things.

#### For minor cell changes, your doctor will:

- take a closer look at your cervix to decide next steps.

#### For major cell changes, your doctor will:

- take a closer look at your cervix and/or treat you right away.

## If your HPV test is Positive (abnormal), and your Pap test is...

### Pap test is Normal

#### This means:

- your cervical cells are normal, but you have HPV.

You may fight off HPV naturally and never get cell changes. Or, you may *not* fight off HPV, and HPV could cause cell changes in the future.

Most women fight off HPV within two years. It is not known why some women fight off HPV and others do not.

#### You should:

- get another Pap test and HPV test in a year.

Cell changes happen slowly. Some time must pass before your doctor can tell if HPV will go away or cause cell changes.

### Pap test is Unclear (ASC-US)

#### This means:

- you have HPV, but your Pap test was unclear.

#### Your doctor will:

- take a closer look at your cervix to find out if your cells are abnormal.

Your doctor may need to remove the abnormal cells or **follow up** with you over time to make sure the cells do not get worse.

### Pap test is Abnormal

#### This means:

- you have HPV
- your cervical cells are abnormal

This does not usually mean you have cancer.

#### For minor cell changes, your doctor will:

- take a closer look at your cervix to decide next steps.

#### For major cell changes, your doctor will:

- take a closer look at your cervix and/or treat you right away.

### If I have HPV, do I have cervical cancer?

No, HPV is not the same as cervical cancer. HPV is the virus that can cause cervical cancer. Many women have HPV. Few of them get cervical cancer if they follow their doctor's advice for more testing and/or treatment.

### What will happen if I need to come back for more testing?

Your doctor will do what's right for you, based on your test results. Your doctor may:

- Ask you to wait before re-doing the Pap and/or HPV test. This is called "watchful waiting." It is common.
- Take a closer look at your cervix. This is done using a special lens that makes your cervical cells look bigger (called a **colposcopy**).
- Take a small sample of your cervix (**biopsy**) to study it more carefully.
- Treat you. This involves killing or taking out the abnormal cells. These treatments may be uncomfortable, but they can be done during one visit to your doctor.
- Refer you to a specialist. This might happen if your test results suggest that you may have cancer.



### Why wait for more tests if I could have cancer?

It is possible that your cell changes will never turn into cancer. They may go back to normal on their own. But cervical cells change very slowly. Some time must pass before your doctor can tell if your cells need treatment. Since treatment can have risks and side effects, it is best to make sure you really need it. Be patient. Go back to your doctor for all appointments and testing—to make sure your cell changes do not get worse.

**Remember:** Many women get HPV or abnormal Pap tests. But few of them get cervical cancer—as long as they get the tests and treatments their doctor recommends. Most times, problems that are found can be treated before they ever turn into cervical cancer.