SYMPTOM

Abnormal pap test

An abnormal Pap test means cervical cells looked unusual or the sample could not be clearly assessed.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Usually nothing; it is a laboratory finding

WHERE IT IS FELT
Cervix, the opening between the womb and vagina

MOST COMMON CAUSES
HPV, temporary cell changes, inflammation

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Heavy bleeding with fainting, dizziness, or severe pelvic pain

USUALLY LASTS
Cell changes may clear; timing reflects their cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
No follow-up plan was arranged after your result

Overview

A Pap test, also called a Pap smear, checks cells collected from the cervix. The cervix is the lower part of the uterus, or womb, that opens into the vagina.

An abnormal result means some cells did not look typical under a microscope. It can also mean the laboratory could not assess the sample properly. An abnormal Pap test is a test finding, not a diagnosis.

Most abnormal results are not cervical cancer. Many are linked to human papillomavirus, or HPV. HPV is a common virus passed through close sexual contact. Some HPV types can cause cervical cell changes that may need monitoring or treatment.

Follow-up is important because the exact result helps determine whether you need another test, an HPV test, or a closer examination of the cervix.

What it may feel or look like

An abnormal Pap test usually causes no physical symptoms. You cannot normally feel cervical

cell changes, and the cervix may look normal without special examination.

Symptoms such as bleeding after sex, bleeding between periods, bleeding after menopause, unusual discharge, or pelvic pain are not caused by the test result itself. They may have many possible causes, including infections, hormone changes, growths such as polyps, or less commonly cervical cancer.

Tell your healthcare professional about these symptoms even if your Pap changes are described as mild. Symptoms require their own assessment rather than waiting only for the next screening test.

Common causes

Common causes: HPV is the main cause of abnormal cervical cell changes. The immune system clears or controls many HPV infections, but some remain detectable and continue affecting cells.

Mild inflammation can also make cells look unusual. This may occur with irritation, a vaginal or cervical infection, or hormone changes around menopause. These changes do not always require treatment.

Sometimes the sample contains too few cervical cells or is obscured by blood, mucus, or inflammation. This is called an unsatisfactory result. It usually means the test needs to be repeated, not that dangerous cells were found.

Less common causes: More significant precancerous changes can develop when a high-risk HPV infection persists. "Precancerous" means the cells are abnormal and could become cancer over time, but they are not cancer.

Changes in glandular cells, which produce mucus inside the cervix and uterus, are less common. They may require additional tests because they can come from different areas.

Serious causes: Cervical cancer can produce an abnormal Pap result, but it is much less common than HPV infection or precancerous change. A result suggesting high-grade changes needs timely follow-up, although the result alone is not usually an emergency.

When to seek medical care

Arrange routine follow-up whenever you receive an abnormal or unsatisfactory result. Contact the clinic if you do not understand the result, have not been given a follow-up plan, or cannot attend the recommended appointment. Do not assume that no news means no further testing

is needed.

Book an appointment if you develop bleeding after sex, bleeding between periods, bleeding after menopause, ongoing unusual discharge, or persistent pelvic pain. These symptoms do not necessarily mean cancer, but they should be assessed.

Seek same-day medical advice for new heavy bleeding, severe pelvic pain, fever, or foul-smelling discharge, particularly after a cervical biopsy or treatment.

Go to emergency care for uncontrolled bleeding, fainting, severe weakness, confusion, difficulty breathing, or severe pain. These symptoms need urgent assessment regardless of your Pap result.

How the cause is found

Start by checking the exact wording of your report. Common terms include:

Your next step depends on the specific result, your HPV test, age, previous cervical results, pregnancy status, immune health, and any past treatment for cervical changes.

You may need a repeat Pap or HPV test. An HPV test looks for high-risk virus types associated with cervical cancer.

Some results require colposcopy. During this procedure, a clinician uses a magnifying instrument to examine the cervix. A small tissue sample, called a biopsy, may be removed and checked in a laboratory. The biopsy can show whether cells are normal, mildly changed, precancerous, or cancerous.

- ASC-US: cells look slightly unusual, but the cause is unclear
- LSIL: low-grade changes, usually associated with HPV
- HSIL: higher-grade changes that are more likely to need treatment
- AGC: unusual glandular cells that need further assessment

Treatment and self-care

An abnormal result itself is not treated. Care is based on what caused the result and how likely the cell changes are to progress.

Mild changes may only need repeat testing because they can clear without treatment. Higher-grade precancerous cells may be removed with a procedure such as a loop electrosurgical excision procedure, often called LEEP, or a cone biopsy. Some changes can be

destroyed with heat or freezing.

Infections or menopausal changes may be treated when they affect symptoms or test quality. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline do not treat HPV.

There is no home remedy that removes abnormal cervical cells. Keep follow-up appointments and make sure the clinic has your current contact details. If you smoke, getting support to stop may help your immune system control HPV, but it does not replace follow-up care.

What to expect

The outlook depends on the exact cell changes and whether high-risk HPV remains present. Many mild abnormalities return to normal or remain stable. Higher-grade changes can usually be treated before they become cancer.

You may need surveillance over months or years, especially after treatment for significant precancerous changes. Ask for a written record of your result, the recommended next test, and when it should happen.

An HPV result can become positive years after exposure because the virus may remain inactive and later become detectable. It does not show when you acquired HPV or from whom.

Common questions

Does an abnormal Pap test mean I have cancer?

No. Most abnormal results are caused by HPV or cell changes that are not cancer. Further testing shows whether the cells need monitoring or treatment.

Can I pass abnormal cells to a partner?

Abnormal cervical cells are not passed between people. HPV, which may have caused the changes, can pass through close sexual contact.

Do I still need follow-up if I feel well?

Yes. Cervical cell changes usually cause no symptoms. Follow-up is based on the laboratory result, not on how you feel.

What if I am pregnant?

Tell the healthcare team that you are pregnant. Pregnancy can affect the timing of testing and treatment. Colposcopy may still be recommended, while treatment is often delayed unless there is concern about cancer.

Can the HPV vaccine treat an abnormal result?

The vaccine does not treat an existing HPV infection or remove abnormal cells. It can protect against HPV types not already acquired, depending on your circumstances.

Sources

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