Why you should have regular Pap smears
What is a Pap smear?
A Pap smear is a quick and simple test used to screen women for changes in the cells of the cervix which may lead to cervical cancer. The cervix is located at the top of the vagina and is the opening to the uterus (womb).

An instrument called a speculum is placed in the vagina so the cervix can be seen clearly. The health care provider collects a cell sample from the surface of the cervix using a small brush. These cells are smeared on to a slide and sent to a laboratory to be analysed under a microscope for any cell changes.

“Is having a Pap smear painful?”
While some women may find Pap smears uncomfortable, it should not be painful. If it is painful, tell the health care provider so that they can reduce your discomfort. Remember, you can ask them to stop at any time.

Why are Pap smears important?
The biggest risk factor for cervical cancer is not having regular Pap smears. Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable of all cancers. Three out of every four women who develop cervical cancer have either never had a Pap smear, or have not had one in the last five years. Having regular Pap smears until you are 70 years old, even after menopause, is your best protection against cervical cancer.
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“**I don’t have any symptoms**”

Early stage cervical cancer often has no symptoms. Pap smear detect cell changes before they become cancerous.

**Do I need a Pap smear?**

Every woman over 18 years of age who has ever had sexual contact should have regular Pap smears. Sexual contact includes intercourse, as well as any other genital skin to skin contact.

After you turn 70, your health care provider may advise you that you no longer need to have Pap smears if your previous smears were normal.

Even if you no longer have periods or haven’t had sexual contact for a long time, you still need to have regular Pap smears.

**What is the link between cervical cancer and HPV?**

Anyone who has ever had sexual contact can have the human papillomavirus (HPV). It is so common that four out of five people will have HPV at some time in their lives. In most cases, it is naturally cleared by the body in one to two years. In rare cases, if the virus persists and is left undetected and untreated, it can lead to cervical cancer. This can take around ten years to develop. Regular Pap smears can detect abnormal cell changes caused by HPV, which can then be monitored or treated to prevent cancer.
“How can I get HPV?”

HPV is spread through genital skin contact during sexual activity. The virus passes through tiny breaks in the skin. HPV is so common that it is considered a normal part of being sexually active. Anyone who has ever had sex can have HPV.

When is the best time to have a Pap smear?

The best time to have a Pap smear is midway between periods, but it can be done at anytime except during your period. If you no longer have periods, any time is suitable. If you have symptoms such as unusual bleeding, discharge or pain, see your health care provider as soon as possible – even if your last Pap smear was less than two years ago and was normal.

How much will it cost?

Two costs are involved – the consultation fee and the Pap smear pathology fee. Some health care providers ‘bulk bill’ and if so, there are no out of pocket expenses for women. Ask what the cost will be when you make an appointment.

How long before I get my results?

It usually takes up to two weeks for your health care provider to receive your results from the laboratory. Make sure you contact your health care provider to get your results.
Does an abnormal Pap smear mean that I have cancer?

It is important to remember that almost all abnormal Pap smear results are NOT due to cancer. One in every ten Pap smears show cell changes. Most of these changes are due to HPV infections which are usually cleared by the body within one to two years. In a small number of cases the changes may be more significant and may need further observation. These changes, if left untreated, may later develop into cervical cancer. If your Pap smear result is abnormal, your healthcare provider will discuss with you the need for further observation or treatment, such as colposcopy (a similar procedure to a Pap smear, but includes a magnified view of the cervix). You may need to have your following Pap smears more frequently.

Ask your health care provider to explain exactly what your abnormal Pap smear result means. Further information on abnormal Pap smears is also available from the WA Cervical Cancer Prevention Program (see contact details on back page).

What if I’ve had a hysterectomy?

If you had a total hysterectomy (meaning your cervix and uterus were removed) for a non-cancerous reason, such as heavy bleeding or fibroids, you do not require further Pap smears. For more information specific to your individual circumstances, it is best to check with your health care provider.
PV vaccine and regular Pap smears

There are currently two HPV vaccines available in Australia; both of which protect against two types of HPV that cause around 70% of cervical cancers. As the vaccines do not prevent cell changes or cervical cancer in women already exposed to HPV, it is best to be vaccinated prior to becoming sexually active.

The vaccines do not protect against all types of cancer causing HPV; therefore, regular Pap smears are still important. Please see your doctor for more information about these vaccines.

“I don’t have time for a Pap smear right now. I’m too busy”

It is important to prioritise your health. A Pap smear only takes a few minutes and is the best protection against cervical cancer.
What if I forget my next Pap smear?

The WA Cervical Cytology Registry (or Pap Smear Registry) maintains and operates the Register - a confidential database of WA women’s Pap smear and other cervical screening test results.

The Registry acts as a safety net for WA women, providing reminder letters when Pap smears and other follow-up tests are overdue.

When you have your next Pap smear or other cervical screening test, your results will be forwarded to the Registry from the laboratory examining your test. If you do not want your results to be forwarded to the Registry, please advise your health care provider at the time of your test.
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Where can I have a Pap smear?

Your doctor or health care provider’s clinic

FPWA Sexual Health Services
(08) 9227 6177

ISHAR Multicultural Centre for Women’s Health
(08) 9345 5335

WOW Clinic for Women with Disabilities
(08) 9224 2774

Aboriginal Medical Services

Community Health Centres

Metropolitan Women’s Health Centres

Fremantle  (08) 9431 0500
Gosnells  (08) 9490 2258
Joondalup  (08) 9300 1566
Mandurah  (08) 9550 0900
Midland  (08) 9250 2221
Northbridge  (08) 6330 5400
Rockingham  (08) 9550 0900
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Regional Community or Women’s Health Centres

Broome  (08) 9194 2222
Bunbury  (08) 9791 3350
Carnarvon  (08) 9941 0515
Derby  (08) 9191 1308
Geraldton  (08) 9964 2742
Kalgoorlie  (08) 9021 8266
Karratha  (08) 9143 2221
Narrogin  (08) 9881 0385
South Hedland  (08) 9158 9222
Don’t wait for a sign

Early stage cervical cancer often has no symptoms

Protect yourself. Have regular Pap smears. Call your GP or health care provider today.

www.health.wa.gov.au
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For further information contact:
WA Cervical Cancer Prevention Program
Phone: 13 15 56
Email: cervicalscreening@health.wa.gov.au

National Cervical Screening Program
A joint Australian, State and Territory Government initiative

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.

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