Getting a Pap test every 3 or 5 years is safe for most women. It can take a long time for cell changes to develop into cancer. Either schedule gives your doctor a chance to find and treat changes in the cells of your cervix that could lead to cancer. Finding changes early is the key to preventing cancer.

Some more frequent testing is recommended depending on your medical history. Ask your doctor about a schedule that’s best for you if you have any concerns.

Some women don’t need Pap tests. You might not need routine Pap tests if you:

- Are 65 or older, your last Pap test was done within the last 3 or 5 years, and it was normal.
- Have had a hysterectomy with removal of the cervix for noncancerous reasons and have no history of CIN.
- Have never been sexually active.

However, once you become sexually active, and you are over age 21, you should begin to have regular Pap tests.

Why should I be concerned about HPV?

There are two types of HPV—low-risk and high-risk. Both types of HPV can cause abnormal cell changes on the cervix. The changes caused by some types of high-risk HPV, if left untreated, can develop into cervical cancer.

A vaccine is available to protect against diseases caused by the specific genital human papillomaviruses (HPV) contained in the vaccine. These HPV viruses can cause genital warts, anal cancer, and precancers of the cervix, vulva, and vagina. Please talk to your doctor for more information about this vaccine.

What if my Pap test is abnormal?

Follow-up to an abnormal Pap test depends on the results. There are many different causes for abnormal results.

Only a small percentage of women who have abnormal Pap test results have changes that might progress to cancer.

If changes are found, your doctor might do additional tests. These tests might include testing your original Pap sample for HPV, asking you to come back for another Pap test, or having a colposcopy.

Colposcopy means “looking at the cervix.” It is similar to a Pap test. An instrument called a colposcope magnifies the cervix so your doctor can take a closer look. Your doctor might remove a small tissue sample.
This is called a biopsy. The tissue is examined under a microscope to look for precancerous changes.

If precancerous changes are found, there are several treatment options that can usually be done in the doctor’s office.

**How can I lower my risk for cervical cancer?**

- Come in regularly for your Pap tests. Early detection and treatment of cell changes in the cervix is key to preventing cancer.
- Don’t smoke. Smoking can weaken the immune system, making it difficult to clear genital HPV from your body. This can put you at greater risk for developing cervical cancer. If you smoke, ask your doctor for information about tobacco cessation programs. You can also call the Quit for Life Program toll-free 1-800-462-5327.

The screening recommendations in this brochure are intended for the general population and may not apply to you. Talk to your doctor about a Pap test schedule that is right for you.

**What if I have unusual symptoms but it isn’t time for my Pap test?**

Some symptoms should be checked right away. If you have any of the following symptoms, or other symptoms that concern you, talk to your doctor even if it isn’t time for your Pap test:

- Bleeding between periods or abnormal bleeding.
- Bleeding or pain from having intercourse.
- Any vaginal bleeding if you have gone through menopause, even if you are using hormone therapy.
- Abnormal vaginal discharge.
- Pelvic pain.
- Persistent itching or irritation of the vulva (on the outside) or opening of the vagina.

**For more information**

The Kaiser Permanente Resource Line can provide information on a variety of health topics. Call weekdays from 9 am to 4 pm 1-800-992-2279.

The Consulting Nurse Service is available to Kaiser Permanente members with medical questions or concerns. Call 24 hours a day toll-free 1-800-297-6877.

Visit the Health and Wellness Resources section on the Kaiser Permanente website at kp.org/wa.

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**Pap Test for the prevention of cervical cancer**

- What is a Pap test?
- When should I come in for a screening Pap test?
- How can I reduce my risk for cervical cancer?