

**PILGRIM SHORES**  
Obstetrics, Gynecology & Midwifery

## **What the Results of a Pap Smear Mean**

### **Patient Information**

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#### **What is a Pap smear?**

A Pap smear is a screening test your doctor does to check for precancer or early cancer of the cervix. The cervix is the opening to the uterus, or womb. Usually Pap smears find problems early - while they are still easy to treat. Before Pap smears were available, cancer of the cervix was common and often fatal. Today, cancer of the cervix is rarely found in women who have regular Pap smears. This is because Pap smears can detect precancerous changes of the cervix, called cervical dysplasia, that are readily treated long before they can progress into a cancer.

#### **Does an abnormal Pap smear mean I have cancer of the cervix?**

Usually not. While an abnormal Pap smear may be a sign of cancer, many different changes on your cervix can cause an abnormal Pap smear. Pap smears can be abnormal if the cervix is inflamed or irritated. This can be caused by an infection of the cervix, douching, menopausal changes, or irritation. The cervix may also be going through some changes called dysplasia. Dysplasia means the cells on the Pap smear look abnormal under the microscope. Dysplasia isn't the same thing as cancer but may lead to cancer if it is not treated. Mild forms of dysplasia may resolve without any treatment but more severe forms of dysplasia may progress to a cervical cancer if not treated.

#### **Why do I need more tests?**

Because your Pap smear was abnormal, more information is needed. An abnormal Pap smear is a general sign that something **may** be wrong. Further tests will be needed to show what (if anything) is actually wrong. You may need another Pap smear or a colposcopy.

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### **What is a colposcopy?**

A colposcope is a special instrument that shines a light on your cervix and magnifies it. The colposcope looks like “binoculars on wheels”. If your doctor sees an area that doesn't look normal, he or she will take a small piece of tissue from that area. This is called a biopsy. The tissue sample will then be evaluated by a pathologist. Having a colposcopy feels similar to having a Pap smear but takes a little longer. Some women have some cramping and bleeding during or after a colposcopy.

### **What are my treatment options?**

Your treatment options depend on the cause of the abnormal results. If the problem is a minor infection, it often can be treated with medication. If the abnormal Pap smear is caused by precancerous (dysplastic) changes in the cells, the affected areas of the cervix may need to be removed. There are several kinds of treatment to remove abnormal tissue from the cervix . All of these treatments may be done in your doctor's office.

### **What happens after I have been treated?**

That depends on what abnormalities are found and how they are treated. In general, most women who have an abnormal Pap smear need to have Pap smears more often for a while after they have been treated. Your doctor will let you know how often you will need to have Pap smears. Once your Pap has returned to normal and continues to be normal, you and your doctor will decide how often the test should be repeated. This information provides a general overview on abnormal Pap smears and may not apply to everyone. Ask us if you have further questions about your pap smear results.