

Cervical Cancer Screening Factsheet

Compiled by VA Portland Health Care System Women's Health Program
January 2021

Cervical cancer screenings are critical, and the Women's Health program at the VA Portland Healthcare System wants to remind you the importance of talking to your provider about your next pap smear. This handout is intended to accompany the video you can find here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbrFBXVvQT0> The following information includes highlights and resources from the video.

What is Cervical Cancer Screening and why is it important?

- The terms "cervical cancer screening" and "pap smear" are often used interchangeably and may also include a Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) test
- Scheduling your regular pap smear is important because this procedure can help detect HPV, which is the leading cause of cervical cancer
- Cervical cancer is asymptomatic, so the pap smear is the best indicator that you may need additional testing or treatment
- Cervical cancer is usually treatable when diagnosed early

What can I expect from a pap smear?

- In general, people ages 21-65 with a cervix should have a regular pap smear every 3-5 years but this can vary. If you have a normal pap smear you probably do not need to repeat the test every year
- The procedure is usually performed by a primary care provider and usually only takes about 3-5 minutes
- You will be asked to get undressed from the waist down and be given a sheet for modesty but feel free to leave on your socks, we want you to be as comfortable as possible
- The provider will insert a speculum into your vagina, which holds the walls of your vagina apart so the provider can see your cervix, and use a brush or spatula to obtain cells for testing
- The procedure usually does not cause pain but may be uncomfortable
- A staff chaperone is required to be in the exam room with the provider

What should I tell my provider?

- Your provider wants to know if you are feeling nervous and if there is anything the team can do to create a more comfortable environment
- Tell your provider if you have had pain during a pap smear in the past
- Ask questions! Feel free to ask your provider to explain the procedure beforehand. You can also ask her what she is doing during the procedure.



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What should I do if I am nervous about getting a pap?

- It is NORMAL to feel nervous about getting a pap! Some people, especially those who experienced sexual trauma, report heightened anxiety, emotional distress, and pain during gynecological procedures.
- Create a plan to bring things to the visit to help with self-soothing and stress reduction such as
 - o Invite a support person into the visit during the procedure or to accompany you after the visit
 - o Bring distraction activities such as a playlist of soothing music or videos on your phone
 - o Bring a stress ball to squeeze or essential oils to smell
 - o Plan for a pleasurable activity to reward yourself after the procedure such as getting ice-cream or taking a walk
 - o Install an app to practice stress reduction breathing exercises and listen to it during your procedure (see links below)
- Advocate for yourself! We want to empower you to talk to your provider if you're nervous or if there is something we can do better at the clinic to make you more comfortable

How can my healthcare team help?

- A member of our team, such as the Primary Care Mental Health provider, can meet with you immediately before and/or during your visit to discuss stress reduction skills
- If your anxiety is preventing you from scheduling your regular pap your provider can make a referral to a Primary Care Mental Health provider who can help you address these concerns for up to 6 visits before your pap smear

What should I expect after my pap smear is completed?

- Expect a letter or a call from your provider within about two weeks
- Normal results mean you may not need a pap for 3-5 years
- Abnormal results will include information on next steps, which usually includes more testing
- Abnormal results do NOT necessarily mean you have cancer



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What if I have more questions or concerns?

- The first step is to call your primary care provider (503-220-3494)
- You can also call the Women Veterans Program Manager (503-220-8262, ext 53431)
- You can always self-refer to mental health if you do not have a primary care provider or would prefer to call directly: 503-220-8262, ext. 56409

Resources:

To read more about the importance of pap smears, see the resources below:

VA Women's Health information:

https://www.womenshealth.va.gov/WOMENSHEALTH/outreachmaterials/reproductivehealth/cervical_cancer.asp

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has a Cervical Cancer website with helpful and more detailed information about pap smears, cervical cancer and HPV:

https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/basic_info/screening.htm

To read more about strategies to build your own self-soothing and stress reduction plan, see the resources below:

Mindfulness practice and audio: The VA offers numerous mental health apps that include mindfulness and stress reduction activities. The "Mindfulness Coach" is an app that you could use to practice relaxation and listen during your procedure.

<https://mobile.va.gov/appstore/mental-health> or you can listen to tracks on the Whole Health Webpage (scroll to the bottom) https://www.portland.va.gov/services/Whole_Health.asp

Consider reviewing tips from the "Manage Stress Workgroup" to help you prepare to tolerate your anxiety during a medical procedure:

https://www.prevention.va.gov/MPT/2013/docs/ManageStressWorkbook_Dec2013.pdf