HPV and Pap Tests

What is the human papillomavirus (HPV)?

- HPV is a virus spread from one person to another through close skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity.
- HPVs are the major cause of cervical cancer.

What is an HPV test?

- An HPV test checks your cervix for the virus that can cause abnormal cells and cervical cancer.
- The HPV test can be done at the same time as a Pap test from the same swab, or an HPV test can be done alone without a Pap test.

What is a Pap test?

- A Pap test checks the cells of the cervix (the opening of the uterus) for changes that could lead to cancer.
- During a pelvic exam, a health care provider inserts a special tool (speculum) into the vagina and collects some cells from the cervix with a swab or brush.

Why is a Pap test and HPV test important?

- Regular Pap tests and/or HPV tests and treatment, when needed, can prevent most cancers of the cervix.
- Women under the age of 30 do not need an HPV test unless the Pap test result is abnormal.
- Women who have cancer of the cervix may not have any symptoms.
- If cancer or precancer develops, it can be found early and treated.
When should I have my first Pap test?

- Women should start having regular Pap tests at age 21.

How often should I get a Pap test and HPV test?

- Women ages 21 to 29 should get a Pap test every three years. You do not need an HPV test unless you have an abnormal Pap test result.
- Women ages 30 to 65 should get a Pap test and HPV test every five years, or an HPV test only every five years, or a Pap test only every three years.
- Women older than 65 should ask their health care provider when to stop having Pap tests.

How can I reduce my risk of cervical cancer?

- Get regular cervical cancer screenings.
- Get any follow-up procedures that are recommended by your health care provider if you had an abnormal Pap test or HPV test.
- Stop smoking. For help quitting, contact NDQuits at 1.800.QUIT.NOW or go to www.ndhealth.gov/ndquits.
- The surest way to avoid getting HPV is by refraining from sexual activity.
- If you do have sex, limit the number of your sexual partners, and always use a condom.
- HPV vaccines are available for males and females ages 9 to 26.
- Women who have received the HPV vaccine still need to get regular cervical cancer screenings.

What do I do if I cannot afford to pay for a Pap test or HPV test?

- Women’s Way may provide a way to pay for Pap tests and HPV tests. Call 1-800-449-6636 or 701-328-2367 or visit www.ndhealth.gov/womensway to see if you are eligible.

This publication was supported by Cooperative Agreement NU58DP006282 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the CDC.