

PREVENTION PROGRAM FOR CERVICAL CANCER

A PROGRAM OF THE SASKATCHEWAN CANCER AGENCY

A Healthy You

Important Information on Pap Tests

The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency encourages women to talk with their health care provider if they are considering becoming sexually active or if they are already having sexual intercourse. Your health matters. Regular Pap tests are also an important part of a healthy lifestyle.

The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency's Prevention Program for Cervical Cancer has updated its guidelines:

- Women can start having routine Pap tests at a later age. Pap testing before age 21 is no longer recommended.
- Most women need Pap tests just once every three years instead of every year. Women should still have Pap tests regularly at least until age 70.

Why were changes made to Saskatchewan's Pap test guidelines?

Pap test guidelines were changed to help make sure women in Saskatchewan continue to benefit from cervical screening but avoid unnecessary tests. Because of research and more in-depth studies, today we know that:

- Most cervical cell changes are caused by infections with certain types of the human papilloma virus (HPV) which are spread by sexual contact.
- Over 70 per cent of people will have an HPV infection in their lifetime.
- People who have HPV may not show signs or symptoms, so they can pass on the virus without even knowing it. The immune system will usually clear the HPV infection within two years. When the virus does not clear, it can cause cell changes that may lead to cervical cancer. These changes develop slowly.
- By getting Pap tests at least once every three years, cervical cell changes can be found early and, if needed, treated so that cancer does not develop.

When should women start having Pap tests?

It is important for women to begin appointments with their care provider when they become sexually active. Starting at age 21, women should also have regular Pap tests.

Being sexually active means having any intimate skin-to-skin contact in the genital area. This includes touching, oral sexual activity, or intercourse with a partner of either gender.

Why can women start having Pap tests at a later age?

Although the previous Saskatchewan Pap test guidelines recommended that testing begin at 18 years of age, cervical cancer is extremely rare in women younger than 21 years. By waiting until age 21 to begin pap testing, or three years after becoming sexually active, whichever is later, almost all cervical cell changes will be found before they progress to cancer.

Women younger than 21 still need regular visits with their health care providers for other health issues and to learn how to protect themselves from HPV and other sexually transmitted infections.



Why do most women need Pap tests just once every three years?

Although previous Saskatchewan guidelines recommended pap tests every year for all women, evidence from many research studies strongly suggests that annual screening offers very little additional protection compared to having Pap tests every three years. This is especially true for women who have had three normal Pap tests in a row. In fact, annual screening results in over-diagnosis of the cervical cell changes that would go away on their own and can result in unnecessary follow-up testing.

How do I know if I can start having my Pap test once every three years?

Discuss your Pap test history with your health care provider to determine what is best for you. Having your Pap test once every three years instead of every year will depend on how many Pap tests you have had, what the results have been, and whether you have any health conditions that affect your immune system.

Are there any symptoms to watch out for between Pap tests?

Tell your health care provider right away if you start bleeding between periods, after sexual intercourse, or after menopause.

Where can I get a Pap test?

Make an appointment with your health care provider. If you need help to find a clinic to get a Pap test done, you can call the Prevention Program for Cervical Cancer at 1-800-667-0017, ext. 2 or send us an e-mail request by going to www.saskcancer.ca under the "Contact Us" tab.

Will the Prevention Program for Cervical Cancer still remind me when I need a Pap test and tell me about my Pap test results?

Yes, you will still receive letters when it is time for your next Pap test. The Prevention Program for Cervical Cancer receives your address information from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Health.

If you have moved to a new home, it is important to change your address with the Saskatchewan Ministry of Health. You can contact them by phone at 1-800-667-7551 or go to www.expressaddress.com.

Do I still need regular Pap tests if I have received the HPV vaccination?

Yes, it is still important to continue to have regular Pap tests, at least every three years, if you have received the HPV vaccine. The HPV vaccine can help prevent about 70 percent of cervical cancers. Just like all vaccines, the HPV vaccine may not fully protect everyone who gets it.

Early detection saves lives

For more information about the Prevention Program for Cervical Cancer call 1-800-667-0017, ext. 2 or visit www.saskcancer.ca.

