

How do I get my test results? When you have the test, ask your doctor or nurse how you will find out the result. You can also ask them to add your name to the NSW Pap Test Register - this confidential service reminds you to have a Pap test if you forget. Information about the Register is available in many different languages. For more information, ring 1800 671 693.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.

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A Pap test is a simple test to help protect women from cervical cancer - but many women don't realise they need one. Sixty year-old Gul*, for instance, thinks she doesn't need one because she's too old, while 21 year old Eleni thinks she doesn't need one because she's too young. Maria, who's 50, believes she doesn't need a test - she's been a widow for 10 years and hasn't had a sexual partner since her husband died.

But all three women need this life-saving test every two years - as does any woman aged between 18 - 70 who has ever had sex. Even if she has only ever had one sexual partner, or even if she hasn't had sex for years, she still needs regular Pap tests.

Why are pap tests so important? Because they save lives by detecting abnormalities in the cervix (entrance to the womb) before cancer develops. By having regular pap tests every two years, problems can be detected and treated before they have the chance to turn into cancer.

What if I'd rather not know if I have cancer? Pap tests aren't meant to find cancer, but to prevent it. Their job is to detect problems early so they can be treated before cancer starts.

What if I've gone through menopause (the change of life)? You still need a test every two years - the risk of cervical cancer increases with age.

What if I've had a hysterectomy? If you have had a hysterectomy which has removed both the uterus and the cervix, you may not need a Pap test - check with your doctor.

What if I'm over 70? If you're over 70 and have never had a Pap test, you need one. But if you're over 70 and have two normal pap tests in the last five years, you don't need any more (but you can continue having them, if you wish).

How is the test done? By looking at the cells in the cervix (located at the top of the vagina). A doctor or nurse uses a small spatula or brush to wipe some cells from the cervix. These cells are sent to a laboratory for testing. The test may feel a bit uncomfortable, but doesn't hurt.

What causes cervical cancer? The cause isn't clear but there seems to be a link with some forms of a virus which causes genital warts and which may be spread during sexual intercourse. Smoking may also increase the risk of cervical cancer.

How common is cervical cancer? About 1000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer in Australia each year, and about 300 women die from it. Most deaths would be avoided if more women had regular Pap tests.

Where can I have a Pap test? Go to a doctor, women's health nurse, family planning clinic, sexual health clinic or women's health centre. If you prefer a woman practitioner, but don't know where to find one, call a family planning clinic, sexual health clinic or women's health centre in your area. Interpreters can be arranged, if necessary. Fairfield Multicultural Family Planning Association at 356, The Horsley Drive, Fairfield (02) 9754 1322, has special services for women of non-English speaking background. A Medicare rebate is available, but the cost may depend on where the test is done.