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## **Abnormal Pap Tests**

What is a Pap test (previously called Pap smear)?

- A Pap test is a screening test for cervical cancer. It looks for abnormal cell changes on your cervix and can detect precancerous cells. A Pap test can result with either normal cells, inconclusive results or abnormal.

Scheduling a Pap test:

- Pap tests typically start at age 21 and continue every 1-5 years until age 65, depending on results.
- Most healthy women with normal Pap tests in the past will only need a Pap test every 3 years.
- Pap testing may be done more frequently or extend past age 65 in women with certain medical conditions, risk factors, or history of abnormal Pap tests.

If my Pap test is abnormal, does that mean I have cervical cancer?

- An abnormal result does not mean you have cervical cancer. In most cases, it simply means some cells have changed on your cervix.
- Some causes for abnormal Pap tests are inflammation, vaginal infection, STDs, and human papilloma virus (HPV).
- The most common cause of abnormal changes on your Pap test come from HPV and HPV testing is included with most Pap tests. Some changes with HPV can lead to cervical cancer, but treatment can prevent this progression.

## What is HPV?

- Human papillomavirus is the most common sexually transmitted infection and can be linked to cervical cancer. Changes to your cervical cells caused by HPV can be mild, moderate or severe.
- Most people who have been sexually active have been exposed to one or more strains of HPV, but this may or may not cause any issues.
- There is a vaccine to help prevent certain strains of HPV called Gardasil. This is recommended by the CDC for all boys and girls at ages 11-12 to ensure children are protected long before they are exposed to the virus and can be given to teenagers and women in their early 20s who missed the vaccine earlier.

## What are the next steps if my pap smear is abnormal?

- Depending on your results, the next step is likely a colposcopy. A colposcopy is a procedure in which your provider will use a microscope to look at your cervix. A special solution is used during the colposcopy to help differentiate the normal cells vs abnormal cells. If abnormal cells are seen, a small biopsy will be taken and sent to the lab for further testing.
- If biopsies come back negative or show low grade changes your clinician will likely continue with yearly pap smear screenings. Typically we want to allow your body's immune system to clear the HPV virus on it's own.
- If abnormal or precancerous cells are found, your provider will want to remove them and will discuss which treatment is best for you.