

# The peace of mind test

The human papillomavirus (HPV) screen is a powerful sentinel for detecting cervical cancer risk.

By **Linda J. Sellers**  
SPECIAL PUBLICATIONS

There's good news for women about cervical cancer: Your risk may be lower than you think — and you may not need a Pap test every single year. How do you determine your risk? Dr. Audrey Garrett, a gynecologist/oncologist who travels globally to educate doctors and patients about HPV, says, "The next time you have a Pap test, ask your doctor for the HPV test too. All women over 30 should be getting this test."

Here are a few basic facts you should know:

- The human papillomavirus (HPV) causes cervical cancer.
- HPV is sexually transmitted.
- Women older than 30 are much more likely to develop cervical cancer.
- The HPV test is approved for use in conjunction with the Pap test and is different from the Pap in several ways.

With a Pap test, a lab technician examines your cervical tissue under a microscope and looks for abnormal cells that may develop into cancer. If the technician sees something suspicious, your test results come back "abnormal" and your doctor recommends that you have another Pap test in three or six months. After a second abnormal reading, doctors recommend a more-invasive, more-conclusive cancer test

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such as a biopsy. The point is to watch diligently for early signs, so if cancer is present, it can be treated early. Some statistics to consider:

- Pap tests often are labeled abnormal when no cancer is present.
- Pap tests come back with false negatives up to 20 percent of the time. In other words, the Pap can miss one in five cases of cervical cancer.



Collin Andrew/The Register-Guard

Dr. Audrey Garrett

The HPV test, on the other hand, is processed by a machine that screens a vaginal swab for the presence of cancer-causing HPVs. Testing positive for one of these viruses is a red flag that you have a high risk and need to be very diligent about watching for cervical cancer. Testing negative means you have some peace of mind. "A negative HPV test is a stronger indicator that

you're not harboring a lesion than a negative Pap smear," Garrett says.

A few more things to know about human papillomavirus:

- There are more than 100 types of HPV.
- Only 15 strains of HPV are known to cause cervical cancer.
- Two types cause more than 70 percent of all cervical cancers.
- The longer the virus stays in your body, the more likely it is to be carcinogenic.
- Not all women who have the dangerous types develop cancer.

How is any of this good news for you? "If your Pap test and your HPV test are both negative, you can safely go three years before your next cervical cancer screening, which includes both tests again," says Garrett. "Those guidelines could change in the future though. There's a lot of talk about going to the triage point that the HPV test is used first, then the Pap afterward if the HPV test is positive."

"I don't think the Pap test is going to go away," Garrett adds, "but it is being superseded by these more biologically pertinent tests."

Additionally, researchers are testing the effectiveness of an HPV home swab that women can obtain themselves, then take the sample into the doctor or lab for testing. Approval of that product will be good news indeed.

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## What about younger women?

Why is the HPV test not approved for women younger than 30? HPV is so prevalent, nearly 80 percent of all women have some form of it at some point in their lives. Dr. Audrey Garrett says, "The young population is so sexually active and their immune system is encountering so many new forms of the virus that the prevalence in some groups is as high as 75 percent. So you lose the benefit of it being a useful triage test."

In younger women, the virus often clears up on its own, even the cancer-causing types.

It's when the virus stays in the cervix for a long time that it becomes most dangerous, which is why women older than 30 are more at risk.

Younger women should ask their doctors about the cervical cancer vaccine.



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