

HPV Part 2—The When's and Where's of Pap Smears

With the addition of HPV testing guidelines for performing pap smears have changed. For years doctors have beat the idea of yearly pap smears into our heads, but that isn't necessarily so.

So when should you start getting pap smears? Many young women will have temporary changes to their pap smears from getting HPV. The majority of these will quickly pass. For this reason it is recommended that young women do not get their first pap smear until 3 years after they start having intercourse or the age of 21—whichever comes first. They still need regular exams every 6-12 months to screen for sexually transmitted diseases once they become sexually active.

Women should start getting yearly pap smears once they are in their twenties. There are some exceptions to this. If you have had three normal pap smears in a row you can start getting your pap smear every 2-3 years. For women over the age of 30 there is the option of getting a pap smear combined with HPV. If both tests are negative you can get a pap every 3 years. Women who have had their cervix removed during hysterectomy and have no history of an abnormal pap smear never need to have a pap smear again. There is a caveat for skipping pap smears—you still need a yearly breast and pelvic exam (pap smears are only a part of your exam!).

Finally if you have any medical conditions that affect your immune system (i.e. HIV) you will need to continue yearly pap smears even if your pap smears have been normal. If you have questions about how often you should be screened ask your doctor.