

What cervical screening can tell about your health

Abnormal pap smear results could indicate treatable infections or early signs of cancer, says obstetrician and gynaecologist Timothy Lim Yong Kuei

Taking care of your health extends beyond staying active and eating well – it also includes screening for silent conditions that may not reveal obvious signs. For women, cervical cancer is one such threat. It often develops slowly and without symptoms, but regular screening can detect abnormalities in the cervix before the cancer takes hold.

One common screening method is the pap smear, used to check for infection, inflammation and early signs of cancer, says Dr Timothy Lim Yong Kuei, obstetrician and gynaecologist at Mount Alvernia Hospital. Here, he explains more about the test and when follow-ups are required.

Q Whom is the pap smear for, and how often should one take the test?

The pap smear is recommended for women aged 25 to 29, especially those who are sexually active. During the screening, a doctor or nurse will gently collect a small sample of cells from the cervix using a soft brush or spatula. The procedure may feel a little uncomfortable, but it should not be painful. The entire process typically takes just a few minutes.

Women aged 30 and above are advised to get an HPV (human papillomavirus) test – administered similarly to a pap smear – to check for high-risk HPV strains that can cause cervical cancer. Pap smears should be repeated every three years, while HPV tests can be taken every five years. For best results, the tests should be scheduled about 10 to 20 days after the first day of menstruation.

Q What can an abnormal pap smear indicate, and what should one do next?

An abnormal pap smear means that some changes were found in the cells of the cervix. It does not automatically point to cancer. In many cases, these



Regular testing helps detect changes in cervical cells that can be addressed before they develop into cancer. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

changes are linked to something treatable, such as a yeast infection, bacterial imbalance, inflammation or even hormonal fluctuations. For instance, if an infection is suspected, the doctor may prescribe treatment such as antifungal or antibiotic medication.

If the result shows more concerning changes, the doctor may recommend a follow-up procedure called a colposcopy. This involves using a specialised instrument to take a closer look at the cervix under magnification. If anything unusual is seen, a tiny sample of tissue (biopsy) may be collected so that the cells can be examined more closely under a microscope. This will help determine whether further treatment is needed.

Q How soon should follow-up screening be done after an abnormal pap smear result?

The timing of the next screening depends on the extent of the cell changes.

If they are mild, the doctor may suggest repeating the pap smear in about six to 12 months to see if the condition of the cells has returned to normal. For more serious changes, treatment may be needed to remove the abnormal cells.

After treatment, patients typically return for another screening – often within six months – to make sure the cervix has healed well and that no abnormal cells remain. Regular screenings help manage cervical health and offer peace of mind.



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