

Screening  
Program for  
Cervical  
Cancer

**Sask**  
**cancer**  
AGENCY

# How is my **Pap** test changing?

Saskatchewan is introducing **combined Pap and HPV reflex testing** to support more accurate and safer follow-up care.

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**Regular cervical cancer screening is the best way to find abnormal cervical cells early and treat them before they become cervical cancer.**

## What is a Pap test?

A Pap test is a simple cancer screening test. It looks for abnormal cells changes on the cervix *before* they become cancer. Over time abnormal cells may become cancer if they are not found and treated.

Pap testing is free and is done by a healthcare provider at their clinic. An instrument called a speculum is inserted into your vagina so your cervix can be seen. Then, cells are taken from the cervix and sent to a lab for testing.

Anyone with a cervix, including women and transgender people, age 25 to 69 should have a Pap test every 3 years.

### Where is the cervix?

The cervix is the bottom part of the uterus, found at the top of the vagina.

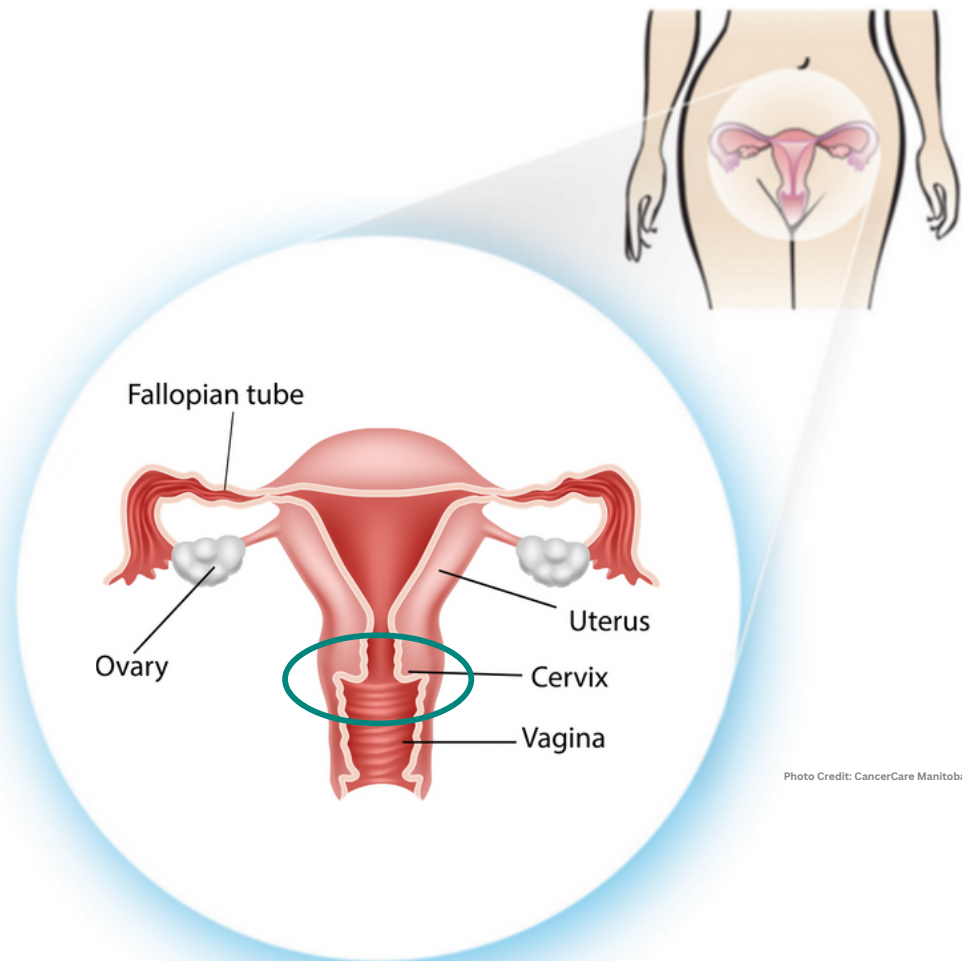


Photo Credit: CancerCare Manitoba

## Why is my Pap test changing?

99.7% of Cervical Cancer is caused by the Human Papillomavirus (HPV).

We can test for that now.



## What is HPV?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the world. It can cause genital warts, cervical cancer and other cancers including anal, vaginal, vulva, penis, and head and neck cancers.

It is passed from one person to another through any skin-to-skin sexual contact below the waistline with fingers, mouths, shared sex toys, or other body parts, even without penetration. Most sexually active people will have at least one HPV infection at some point. Most HPV infections go away on their own within two years without a person ever knowing they had it.

There are over 100 types of HPV. Most of them are harmless and cause no symptoms. Approximately 40 types of HPV can infect the genital region. Of these 40, approximately 13 to 15 are "high-risk" HPV types. High-risk HPV infections can cause changes in the cells of the cervix. When high-risk HPV does not go away, it usually takes 10-20 years for infected cells to develop into cancer.

Having a high-risk HPV infection does not mean a person has or will develop cancer. A high-risk HPV infection may lead to cancer if it has gone many years without being detected or treated.



## How is my Pap test changing?

There are three main changes to your Pap test.

- 1 Screening now starts at age 25 or three years after becoming sexually active, whichever is later.
- 2 Routine screening is now every three years until the age of 69.
- 3 Improved screening with combined Pap and HPV reflex testing.

# 1

## Screening starts at age 25 or three years after becoming sexually active, whichever is later.

### Why has this changed?

#### Cervical cancer is rare in people younger than 25 years of age.

- Most HPV infections in young people do not cause cancer.
- 90% of HPV infections will disappear on their own within two years. When a high-risk HPV does not go away, it usually takes 10-20 years for infected cells to develop into cervical cancer.

#### Cervical screening in young people (under 25 years) can be harmful.

Pap testing and follow-up procedures can expose young people to unnecessary risks including:

- discomfort or bleeding from the tests;
- anxiety that may result from abnormal test results;
- over-diagnosis of abnormal cell changes that could go away on their own; and,
- problems with future pregnancies from some treatments during colposcopy.

### When do I start screening?



- Anyone with a cervix can start screening at age 25 or three years after becoming sexually active, whichever is later.
- Sexual activity includes intercourse as well as digital or oral sexual activity involving the genital area with a partner of any gender.

**When you are 25 years old, the Screening Program for Cervical Cancer will send you a letter inviting you to screen.**

## 2 Routine screening is every three years until the age of 69

### Why has this changed?

#### Same benefits with less risk.

- Having a Pap test every 2 years offers very little added benefits over having a Pap test every 3 years, and can expose people to unnecessary risks (as outlined on page 5).
- Improved screening with combined Pap and HPV reflex testing more accurately guides follow-up and treatment (more on page 7). This means:
  - Fewer people will be over-diagnosed; and,
  - Fewer people will have unnecessary treatment.

#### Most HPV infections will go away.

- 90% of HPV infections will go away on their own within two years.

#### HPV takes a long time to develop into cancer.

- When high-risk HPV does not go away, it usually takes 10-20 years for infected cells to develop into cervical cancer. Regular screening allows for many opportunities to detect cell changes before cancer can develop.

### How often should I be screened?

- Routine screening is done every three years until age 69.



### You should still screen regularly if:

- You've been through menopause;
- You've ever been sexually active, even if you are not currently sexually active;
- You've had the HPV vaccine; or
- You are in a same-sex relationship.

**When you are due for your next Pap test, the Screening Program for Cervical Cancer will send you a reminder letter.**

## What is combined Pap and HPV reflex testing?



### Pap Test

- A Pap test checks for abnormal cell changes on the cervix.
- If these cell changes are left undetected and untreated for years they may develop into cervical cancer.
- Everyone going for cervical screening will get a Pap test.

### HPV Reflex Test

- An HPV reflex test detects high-risk HPV in a Pap test sample.
- The lab runs an HPV reflex test automatically for people in specific age groups with certain Pap test results.
- The HPV result combined with your Pap test result helps your healthcare provider decide what follow-up you may need.
- *Learn more about HPV on page 3.*

## 3 Improved screening with combined Pap and HPV reflex testing

Saskatchewan has introduced improved screening with combined Pap and Human Papillomavirus (HPV) reflex testing.

### Why add HPV reflex testing?

**The HPV reflex test looks for high-risk HPV, which causes 99.7% of cervical cancer.**

**Combined Pap and HPV reflex testing can find cervical cell changes and more accurately predict which cell changes are more likely to develop into cervical cancer.**

- This helps you get the right follow-up and reduces unnecessary treatment.

### Will I need another exam for HPV reflex testing?

No. Just as before, your healthcare provider will collect a Pap sample. This sample will be used for your Pap test. Depending on the results and your age, the lab will test for HPV using the same sample.

### What does “reflex” mean in HPV reflex testing?

“Reflex” testing means the lab automatically tests for HPV when people in specific age groups have certain Pap test results. This gets your results to you faster than if the test was ordered after your healthcare provider reviewed your initial Pap test result.

## Frequently asked questions:

### Who can catch HPV?

HPV is very common and is easily spread through skin-to-skin sexual contact below the waistline with fingers, mouths, shared sex toys or other body parts, even without penetration. It can be passed between partners of any gender or sexual orientation.

Anyone who is sexually active or has ever been sexually active is at risk for HPV infection. About 80% of people who are sexually active will get at least one HPV infection in their lifetime. Most people who have HPV do not know they have it.

### Who gets HPV reflex testing?

Only people in specific age groups with certain abnormal Pap results will have an HPV reflex test.

HPV reflex testing helps healthcare providers recommend appropriate follow-up care. HPV reflex testing is automatically done in situations where follow-up care is not clear based on Pap testing results alone. These situations usually arise for certain abnormal Pap test results among people 30 years and older, or 50 years and older.

### Should my partner/boyfriend/spouse get HPV testing?

At this time, there is no approved test for HPV in men.

If your partner or spouse has a cervix, they should have regular cervical cancer screening by booking an appointment for a Pap test.

### Do I have to share my HPV test results with my partners?

It is always your choice whether or not to talk your partners about HPV. HPV is a very common virus and most people who are sexually active will eventually be exposed to it. An HPV infection usually goes away on its own and there are tests such as cervical screening that can monitor for possible complications due to HPV. This means there is no medical need to tell you partners.

Whether you or your partner have been diagnosed with HPV, it's important to not blame or shame. There's no way to know for sure when HPV was passed on, or by whom.

### Changing your address?



To continue to receive communication from the Screening Program for Cervical Cancer, it is important that you update any address changes. Contact eHealth by calling **1-800-667-7551**, emailing [change@ehealthsask.ca](mailto:change@ehealthsask.ca), or online at [ehealthsask.ca](http://ehealthsask.ca).





## What is the HPV vaccine and who can get it?

HPV vaccines are highly effective at protecting against genital warts and several of the HPV types that are responsible for cervical cancer and other cancers. HPV vaccination is approved for females (9 - 45 yrs) and males (9 - 26 yrs). HPV vaccines have been researched and used for many years and are safe. The best time to receive the HPV vaccine is before any sexual activity has occurred. However, even if you have been sexually active, have had HPV, or are currently infected with HPV, the vaccine can still be of benefit to you.

Talk to your healthcare provider to see if the HPV vaccine is right for you. Contact your local [Public Health Office](#) to find out if you are eligible for the HPV vaccine at no cost.

## I have had the HPV vaccine, why do I still need cervical cancer screening?

HPV vaccination is highly effective at protecting against several types of HPV but not every type; therefore, it is still important to be screened for cervical cancer as recommended by the [Screening Program for Cervical Cancer](#) and your healthcare provider.

## Where can I find more information?

### Cervical Cancer Screening

- Learn more about cervical cancer screening at [saskcancer.ca/spcc](https://saskcancer.ca/spcc)
- Find resources on HPV and cervical cancer screening in multiple languages, click [here](#)

### HPV Info

- Learn more about HPV at [hpvinfo.ca](https://hpvinfo.ca)

### HPV Vaccination

- For more information on HPV vaccination, click [here](#) and download the information sheet.
- Contact your local [Public Health Office](#) to find out if you are eligible for the HPV vaccine at no cost.

### References

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# Cervical cancer screening is improving.

*It is more accurate.*

*It is even safer.*

*Only one exam.*

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