

Everything about Pap testing in Alberta just changed

Frequently Asked Questions

What about Pap testing in Alberta just changed?

- Women can start having routine Pap tests at a later age. Having a Pap test before you are 21 is no longer recommended.
- Most women need Pap tests just once every 3 years instead of every year.

Women should still have Pap tests regularly at least until age 70.

Who revised the Pap test guidelines?

The 2009 Cervical Cancer Screening Guidelines were written by a group of independent doctors, nurses, and healthcare experts led by Toward Optimized Practice (TOP). TOP develops most of the guidelines used by healthcare providers in Alberta.

Why were changes made to Alberta's Pap test guidelines?

Pap test guidelines were changed to help make sure women in Alberta benefit from cervical screening and avoid unnecessary tests. Pap tests are used to identify changes in the cells of the cervix. Since the earlier guidelines were written, new and improved lab technologies for reading Pap tests have been developed. There is a new understanding about how cervical cancer develops. It is now known that:

- Most cervical cell changes are caused by infections with certain types of the human papillomavirus (HPV).
- These types of HPV are spread by sexual contact.

- HPV is common and spreads so easily that over 70% of people will get HPV in their lifetime.
- Most people don't even know when they have HPV because there are usually no symptoms.
- The immune system will usually clear the HPV within 2 years.
- When the virus does not clear, it can cause cell changes that may lead to cervical cancer. These changes happen slowly.
- By getting Pap tests at least once every 3 years, cervical cell changes can be found early and if needed, treated so that cancer does not develop.

What do the guidelines say about when women should start having Pap tests?

The revised Pap testing guidelines recommend that:

“Women should have Pap tests regularly starting at age 21, or 3 years after becoming sexually active, whichever is later.”

Being sexually active means having any intimate skin-to-skin contact in the genital area. This includes touching, oral sexual activity, or intercourse with a partner of either gender.



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Why can women start having Pap tests at a later age?

Although the previous Alberta Pap test guidelines recommended that testing begin at 18 years for women who had ever had sexual intercourse, cervical cancer is very rare in women younger than 21 years. It is rare in this age group because it takes many years for cervical cell changes to develop into cancer, beginning with an HPV infection that doesn't go away.

Many women will have an HPV infection soon after becoming sexually active, but most of these infections clear up on their own within 1–2 years. By waiting until age 21 to begin Pap testing, or 3 years after becoming sexually active, whichever is later, almost all important cervical cell changes will be found before they progress to cancer.

Women younger than 21 will still need regular visits with their healthcare providers for other health issues and to learn how to protect themselves from HPV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Why do most women need Pap tests just once every 3 years?

The revised Pap test guidelines say that unless their healthcare provider tells them otherwise,

“Women should start by having a Pap test once a year for 3 years. If all 3 tests are normal, most women can begin having Pap tests once every 3 years.”

Although earlier Alberta guidelines recommended Pap tests every year for all women, evidence from many research studies strongly suggests that annual screening offers very little extra protection compared to having Pap tests every 3 years. This is especially true for women who have had 3 normal Pap tests in a row. In fact, annual screening results in over-diagnosis of the cervical cell changes that would go away on their own and results in unnecessary follow-up testing.

All other provinces in Canada have also moved away from annual Pap testing.

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How do I know if I can start having my Pap test once every 3 years?

Discuss your Pap test history with your healthcare provider to determine what is best for you. Having your Pap test once every 3 years instead of every year will depend on how many Pap tests you have had, what the results of those Pap tests have been, and whether you have any health conditions that affect your immune system.

Are there any symptoms to watch out for between Pap tests?

Tell your healthcare provider right away if you start bleeding between periods, after sexual intercourse, or after menopause.

Where can I get a Pap test?

Make an appointment with your healthcare provider. If you need a family doctor or want to find a women's health clinic:

- Call Health Link Alberta at 1-866-408-LINK (5465)
- Visit informalberta.ca
- Visit cpsa.ab.ca

Where can I get more information about Pap testing in Alberta?

- Visit screeningforlife.ca
- Call the Alberta Cervical Cancer Screening Program at 1-866-727-3926

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