HPV TESTING & ASCUS PAP RESULTS

Each year, more than two million women in the United States receive inconclusive – or ASCUS – Pap test results. If you’ve had an ASCUS Pap test report, you’re probably wondering what that means and, like most women, are concerned about cervical cancer.

There is now a test that can help clarify a woman’s results. The HPV test can accurately detect the presence of human papillomavirus (HPV), the virus shown to be the primary causal factor in the development of cervical cancer.

While most women who test positive for HPV will not develop cervical cancer, the HPV test can provide your clinician with helpful information that can better direct your ongoing care. Studies by the National Cancer Institute and others show that HPV testing can be the most effective way to manage women with ASCUS Pap results.

Frequently Asked Questions

On HPV:

Q: What is HPV (Human Papillomavirus)?
A: HPV is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections. Experts estimate that over 20 million Americans are currently infected. In most cases, a healthy immune system will suppress or clear the virus. Most women with HPV will not develop cervical cancer. However, if HPV infection is persistent, there is a greater chance of developing cell changes that may lead to cervical cancer.

Q: What are the signs of an HPV infection?
A: In most cases, the HPV virus is harmless and has no symptoms. However, an HPV infection may cause changes in the cervical cells, which are identified in your Pap test. Left untreated, these changes can lead to cervical cancer. Low-risk, non-cancer-causing types of HPV can also appear as visible genital warts.

   Signs of HPV infection can appear weeks, months, or even years after initial infection, so it is possible to become infected without being aware of it. Also, women infected during their teenage years may show no cervical cell changes until their thirties or forties, or may not develop any changes at all.

Q: Who can be infected by HPV?
A: Anyone who has ever been sexually active can get an HPV infection.
Q: Can HPV infections be treated?
A: While there is currently not a treatment for the virus itself, treatments do exist for the problems HPV can cause, such as cervical lesions (changes of the skin) or genital warts. For cervical lesions, your doctor may recommend a relatively simple procedure to remove the affected area. Genital warts caused by HPV are treatable by using several effective wart therapies. These standard procedures are often performed in the doctor’s office. Your doctor will discuss these and other effective treatment options with you.

On ASCUS Pap Results and the HPV Testing:

Q: What is an ASCUS Pap test result?
A: ASCUS, which stands for Atypical Squamous Cells of Undetermined Significance, is an inconclusive (difficult to diagnose) category of Pap test readings. This category has traditionally been a challenge for cervical cancer screenings, as doctors and patients have had no way to tell which cases require more evaluation and which do not.

As a result, women have traditionally been told to either come back for a repeat Pap test in a few months or have been referred directly for a more invasive procedure called a colposcopy. The result for women has often been anxiety as well as extra office visits and additional costs.

Q: Why should I have an HPV test?
A: The HPV test is valuable in selected cases to determine whether a woman with an abnormal Pap test report is at an increased risk for the development of cervical cancer. If such a woman is HPV-negative, its use may save her from unnecessary stress and help give peace of mind in situations that have often been difficult and confusing for both the woman and her doctor.

Q: How is the HPV specimen collected?
A: If your doctor uses the ThinPrep® Pap Test™, then one sample for both the HPV test and the Pap test are collected at the same time, so you don’t need a follow-up visit. The specimen is collected in the same manner as a healthcare provider would collect a Pap test. A collection device is inserted into the endocervix to get a sample for testing. The cells are then sent to a laboratory for evaluation.

Q: I had an ASCUS Pap test and then a positive HPV test result. Does that mean that I have cervical cancer?
A: No. A positive HPV result following an inconclusive Pap test means that you are infected with the virus and you may have cell changes that, left untreated, could eventually lead to cervical cancer. Further examination will be needed to see if your cervix has these cell changes.