Further investigations and follow-up

The type of follow-up you require will depend on whether you have had any previous abnormal Pap smears, your age and your result. Sometimes the only follow-up you will need will be another Pap smear. A colposcopy is also commonly recommended after an abnormal Pap smear.

What is a colposcopy?

A colposcopy is a procedure where a specialist uses a special microscope on a stand (a colposcope) to look at the cervix. The colposcope is positioned outside the body. The specialist then looks through the colposcope at your cervix and vagina and can see abnormal areas that are otherwise invisible to the naked eye. It usually takes about 15 minutes and is a similar procedure to a Pap smear. It is not an operation and no anaesthetic or hospital stay is necessary.

During colposcopy the specialist will use a solution on your cervix to highlight any abnormal looking areas of the cervix. The specialist may take a tiny piece of tissue (a biopsy) from any abnormal areas for further examination. The biopsy is sent to a pathology laboratory to be examined and the results are usually available within 1-2 weeks.

What if I need treatment?

If you need further treatment the specialist will discuss this with you when you have your colposcopy, or when your biopsy results have come back from the pathology laboratory. Feel free to ask as many questions as you like so that you understand what is going on and why. There is a list of questions overleaf that you may find useful.

There are a variety of treatments available. Your treating doctor will discuss with you the best form of treatment for you.

AN ABNORMAL PAP SMEAR RESULT

What this means for you

After an abnormal Pap smear:

- What does my Pap smear result mean?
- Do I need more tests?
- Can you give me more information about HPV?
- When is my next check-up due?
- How often will I need to come back?

After colposcopy/biopsy:

- What does my biopsy show?
- What treatment do you advise and why?
- Are there other options?
- Will I need time off work?
- What if I can get pregnant?
- How else can I care for myself?
- When will the bleeding/vaginal discharge stop?
- Will this affect my sex life?

Questions you may want to ask about your result or follow-up

Where can I get more information?

Queensland Cervical Screening Program (QCSP)

13 15 56
(cost of a local call) or visit www.health.qld.gov.au/cervicalscreening

National Cervical Screening Program

Visit the National Cervical Screening Program website at www.cancerscreening.gov.au

If you have difficulty communicating in English you can phone the Translating and Interpreting Service for assistance on 13 14 50 (for the cost of a local phone call).

You can download a language specific Abnormal Pap Smear Result fact sheet from www.cancerscreening.gov.au

This brochure includes some basic information about your Pap smear result. It is not intended to answer all your questions and so it is very important to talk about your result further with your health care provider.
The Pap smear detects early changes in the cells of the cervix (neck of the womb) at the top of the vagina. Around 1 in 10 Pap smears will show changes. These are most often transient changes which will clear with time. Sometimes changes indicate the need for further tests and treatment. Treatment is usually minor and successful at preventing cancer developing. Only very rarely are Pap smear changes due to cancer.

Key facts:

• Almost all abnormal Pap smear results are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV).
• HPV is a virus that can infect any part of the genital area in men and women.
• Anyone who has ever had sex can have HPV – it is so common that four out of five people will have had HPV at some time in their lives.
• In most cases, HPV clears up by itself in one to two years.
• In rare cases, if HPV persists in the cells of the cervix and abnormal changes are not detected or treated, these changes may progress to cervical cancer. This usually takes up to 10 years.
• Smoking can increase your risk of cervical cancer.
• Stopping smoking can help you to clear HPV quickly and reduce the risk of cell changes progressing to cervical cancer.
• Pap smears are the best way to detect early warning signs that cancer may develop in the future.
• It is normal to feel worried if you have just found out that your Pap smear result is abnormal. Talking with your health care provider can help you understand what your Pap smear result is abnormal. What does an abnormal Pap smear result mean?

There are a number of different Pap smear results that may require follow-up. Some of these are related to the quality of the Pap smear and are called "unsatisfactory" smears. Others may be related to changes caused by HPV and are called squamous or glandular abnormalities. Your health care provider can discuss your result with you in detail. The following information provides a brief outline of the types of results that may be reported by the laboratory.

Unsatisfactory smears

Sometimes there is a technical problem with the Pap smear that makes it impossible for the laboratory staff to give an accurate or definite result. A Pap smear can be unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. The most common reasons are:

• Insufficient cells are present on the slide
• Insufficient cells are present on the slide
• In some cases, not enough cells are present on the Pap smear slide for the laboratory staff to assess. Your health care provider will suggest you have a repeat Pap smear (no sooner than six weeks after your last smear) so that the smear can be assessed.
• Inflammation
• Sometimes a Pap smear will show signs of inflammation. This may be caused by common vaginal conditions such as thrush or bacterial vaginosis or by micro-organisms, for example, Trichomonas or Chlamydia. Sometimes the cause of the inflammation may be detected by the Pap smear, however further tests are usually undertaken to identify and treat the cause.
• Hormonal effects (usually called an Atrophic Smear)
An atrophic smear can be difficult for the laboratory to interpret. Atrophic Pap smears result from decreased oestrogen levels and are often seen in breast-feeding women or women after menopause. It is recommended that the Pap smear is repeated after a woman uses local oestrogen treatment.

Low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion (LSIL)

These changes are minor and are usually due to infection with HPV. The majority of women clear HPV without treatment and as a result most low-grade changes disappear over time. The follow-up of women with low-grade abnormalities is generally the same, but may vary according to your age and whether you have had abnormal results in the past and if your immune system is healthy. Your health care provider will explain the follow-up you require.

High-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion (HSIL)

A high-grade abnormality (HSIL) suggests there are cell changes in the cervix that require further investigation. These changes are still precancerous changes (changes that occur before cancer develops) however, if they are left untreated, they are more likely in rare cases to develop into cervical cancer. It usually takes up to ten years before high-grade abnormalities develop into cervical cancer. Your health care provider will refer you to a specialist for further investigation using colposcopy.

Glandular abnormalities

Glandular abnormalities are seen in cells from the top part of the cervix that leads to the uterus or womb. A glandular abnormality requires further investigation using colposcopy.

Cells of the Cervix

Diagram illustrates the transformation zone, glandular and squamous epithelial cells, in the female reproductive organs.