



Fact Sheet

Student Health Services, Texas A&M University

Pap Smears and the Pelvic Exam: What Every Woman Needs to Know

Why do I need a pelvic exam and a pap smear?

Routine pelvic exams (sometimes called annual exams or well woman exams) and Pap smears are important tests used to detect potentially severe health problems in women. The American Cancer Society recommends all women begin cervical cancer screening within three years of becoming sexually active (vaginal intercourse) or by age 21.

But I've never had sex!

The pelvic exam and Pap smear are looking for abnormalities that may exist regardless of your sexual activity, some of which may impact your ability to have children in the future. Also, your health-care provider can provide information and advice on issues and questions regarding your health.

What does it involve?

When you first enter the exam room, a nurse will record your body weight, temperature, blood pressure, and other vital signs. The nurse will then ask you to change into an examination gown. When the healthcare provider comes into the room, he/she will begin by asking questions about your medical history and other important information. Be honest – your medical record is confidential and the healthcare provider needs all the information you can provide in order to make the best recommendations regarding your health. Also, at any time, feel free to ask questions or express feelings or concerns.

The Pelvic Exam and Pap Smear

During a pelvic exam, the healthcare provider first examines the external reproductive organs for discoloration, discharge, or other abnormalities. Next, he/she will gently insert a speculum into the vagina. The speculum is an instrument that enables the healthcare provider to look into the vagina. They come in several sizes, but are typically no wider than two fingers. The speculum may be uncomfortable, but should not be painful. Women who have had vaginal intercourse or have used tampons typically experience little discomfort. *If this is your first pelvic exam, or the idea of the speculum is uncomfortable or scary, it is very important to talk with your healthcare provider about this issue.*

While the speculum is in place, the healthcare provider may collect a few cells from your cervix using a soft brush. When the cells are collected, you may experience a cramp similar to a menstrual cramp, but the feeling should subside quickly. If this process is painful, tell your healthcare provider. The process may be uncomfortable, but it should not be painful. The collected cells will be examined under a microscope to determine if there are cancerous or pre-cancerous changes in your cervical cells. This test is the best means to detect cervical cancer in its earliest stages. After everything is collected, the speculum is removed.

The healthcare provider will then evaluate the internal reproductive organs (uterus and ovaries) by inserting one or two fingers into the vaginal canal and pressing on the abdomen with his/her free hand. Again, you will feel some pressure but this should not be painful.

Other tests that may be performed

The healthcare provider may also perform a clinical breast exam. He/she will look at and examine your breast tissue for abnormalities. This is a good opportunity to discuss with your healthcare provider any unusual findings you have detected during your monthly breast self-exam.

During the exam (at your request) the healthcare provider may collect laboratory samples in order to screen you for sexually transmitted infections. Many STIs produce no symptoms—you may not realize you have them.

After the exam is over, the healthcare provider will leave the room and you will be allowed to get dressed. At the conclusion of your visit, the doctor or nurse practitioner will discuss the findings of your examination with you. Be sure to ask any questions that you may have at this time. It is important that you understand your health and have all of your questions answered.

Who should I call?

Many healthcare providers routinely provide pelvic exams and Pap smears. Some women prefer male healthcare providers, while others prefer women. The choice is up to you. Individuals that can perform pelvic exams and Pap smears include physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants.

Student Health Services has a dedicated Women's Health Center that specializes in the health needs of college women. The experienced staff members understand many of the issues facing women at Texas A&M and are available for all of your health needs. The staff are especially sensitive to women who have never been to a healthcare provider alone and to those women who have never had a pelvic exam. Our staff pride themselves as being a valuable resource on women's health for the student body at Texas A&M. To schedule an appointment with the Women's Health Center, call 979-458-8387.

Before you go...

- ⇒ Do not schedule your appointment to occur during your menstrual period—schedule at least 5 days after your menstrual period stops.
- ⇒ Do not have sex for two days prior to your exam
- ⇒ Do not use vaginal foams, jellies, creams, or tampons 2–3 days before your appointment.
- ⇒ While douching is not recommended, if you do, do not douche for 2–3 days before your appointment.
- ⇒ Create a list of questions, concerns, or other issues you would like to discuss with the healthcare provider and take the list with you.
- ⇒ Make sure to discuss any other concerns, especially if you are experiencing pain or are uncomfortable.