HPV and Anal PAP Testing  
(Anal Papanicolaou Smear)

The Anus

The anus is the opening at the lower end of the large intestine, below the rectum. The anus is formed partly from outer skin layers of the body and partly from intestinal tissues. Two ring-like muscles, called sphincter muscles, control the passage of stool from the body. The anal canal, the part of the anus between the rectum and the anal opening, is about 1 ½ to 2 inches long.

HPV and Anal Cancer

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a very common virus that men and women can get during sexual contact. More than half of people who are sexually active get HPV at some time in their lives. They often don’t know it because they don’t have symptoms or other health problems. Our immune system (the system in our bodies that helps fight infection and disease) can often clear it out, but certain types of HPV are hard to fight. There are more than 100 types of HPV.
Some types of HPV cause common warts of the hands or feet, but these are not usually spread by sexual activity. Other types of HPV may cause warts or changes in the cells of the skin, mouth, or genitals (penis, vagina, or anus). Still other types of HPV can lead to anal cancer or cancer of the cervix in women if they are not caught early. The types of HPV that cause genital warts are not the same as the types of HPV that cause cancer.

HPV is the main cause of anal cancer. Risk factors for anal cancer include HIV infection, having anal sex or multiple sex partners, and smoking. People who have weak immune systems, such as those who have had organ transplants or need to take drugs to suppress their immune systems, also have a higher risk of anal cancer.

In recent years the number of people getting anal cancer, especially men who have sex with men, has been on the rise. People with HIV often have a harder time fighting HPV, so it is important that men, as well as women with HIV, get tested for HPV infection. An anal pap test may be helpful in finding changes in cells so that anal cancer could be prevented or caught early.

**What is an anal pap test?**

An anal pap test is a screening test that can be done on men and women. It is a test that looks for changes in the cells of the anus that could lead to anal cancer (very much like pap smears of the cervix in women). The anal pap test does not test for colon or rectal cancer.

**How is the anal pap test done?**

The anal pap test will take less than 5 minutes. In most cases, it will cause little or no discomfort.

During this test, you may be asked to lie on your side on an exam table, or may be asked to bend forward over an exam table. Your provider will insert a swab, which looks like a long, thin Q-tip, about 1 ½ - 2 inches into your anus, and will collect a sample of cells. The sample is then sent to the lab, where the cells are looked at under a microscope to see if there are any changes. You will receive the results of the test in 1-2 weeks.

**What do the results mean?**

- **Negative.** The cells are normal. Your provider will repeat the anal pap in one year.
- **Unsatisfactory.** The sample of cells was not adequate for evaluation. Your provider will repeat the anal pap in 3-6 months.
- **ASCUS (Atypical Squamous Cells of Undetermined Significance).** There are some unusual cells, but it is unclear what this means. This is a mild abnormality. **THIS DOES NOT MEAN YOU HAVE CANCER.**
• **ASC-H** (Atypical Squamous Cells, cannot exclude a High Grade Anal Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion (HSIL). This could be a mild or severe abnormality. **THIS DOES NOT MEAN YOU HAVE CANCER.**

• **LSIL** (Low Grade Anal Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion). This is a mild abnormality. **THIS DOES NOT MEAN YOU HAVE CANCER.**

• **HSIL** (High Grade Anal Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion). This is a more severe abnormality. **THIS DOES NOT MEAN YOU HAVE CANCER.**

• **Squamous Carcinoma.** This is a rare result that means the cells show major changes that might be cancer. In this case, a specialist will take tiny samples of tissue (do a biopsy). These samples are sent to a lab to be looked at under a microscope in order to see changes in the cells that might be cancer.

**What if my results are abnormal?**

If you have an abnormal pap test, your provider will tell you what follow-up tests will be needed and will arrange to have them done at a later date.

**References**


Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person’s health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright ©2016. University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#7056.