

PREVENTIVE WOMEN'S HEALTH
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THE ABNORMAL ASCUS PAP SMEAR

Anatomy of the cervix

The cervix is the lower part of the uterus (womb) which rests in the back of the vagina. The cervix normally sheds microscopic cells into the vagina which are harvested during the pap smear.

The function of the cervix is to 'pull' sperm from the vagina up into the uterus so that pregnancy can occur.

Once a woman starts having intercourse, she is at risk for developing abnormal pre-cancerous cells on her cervix which are called dysplasia (meaning abnormal or uncontrolled cellular growth). Although these cells are not actual cancer, in time without detection or treatment they will develop into cervical cancer.

The purpose of the pap smear screening protocol is to find these women who have dysplasia and offer treatment before the disease progresses to cervical cancer. There are no symptoms with dysplasia to alert the patient and the cervix usually appears normal on visual exam by the gynecologist. The pap smear along with a cervical tissue biopsy is the only way to find and diagnose dysplasia.

Pap Smear Interpretation

The cytopathologist is basically looking at cells (circles) on a microscope slide. If the cells are normal size the pap is normal. If the cells are larger than normal then the pap is abnormal with the degree of abnormality related to the size of the cells. **PLEASE NOTE THAT THE PAP RESULT IS NOT DIAGNOSTIC OF DYSPLASIA BUT RATHER ONLY AN INTERPRETATION OF THE SIZE OF THE CELLS. AN ABNORMAL RESULT DOES NOT MEAN THAT THE PATIENT HAS DYSPLASIA.** Cervical cells can be enlarged because of vaginal discharge/infection, blood, semen, a tampon irritating the cells and a high vaginal pH irritating the cells without any dysplastic cells being present.

The ASCUS Pap

ASCUS pap result stands for 'Atypical cervical cells of unknown significance'. This is the first level of abnormal pap results- meaning that the cervical cells on the pap are only slightly larger than normal. Most women with this pap result (98%) DO NOT HAVE DYSPLASIA. Further testing will depend on whether the viral HPV DNA test is positive or not (see below). If the HPV DNA test is negative, no further test of the ASCUS pap is

needed except repeating the pap again in 6-12 months. If the HPV DNA test is negative the patient's risk of having dysplastic cells on her cervix is extremely low.

HPV

Human Papilloma Virus is a family of over a hundred different subtypes where 4 are known to cause cervical dysplasia/cancer. These viruses are sexually transmitted (intercourse). An HPV cervical infection is asymptomatic- the patient doesn't know that she has the infection. The infection clears in 7-10 days but the viral DNA is left behind in the cervical cells. An HPV viral DNA test will be done in the lab on any abnormal pap smear to check for the presence of viral DNA which would increase the patient's risk of having pre-cancerous dysplastic cells on her cervix. If this DNA test is negative the patient has a very low risk of having dysplastic cells. There is no treatment available for a positive DNA test- we can only look for and treat the dysplastic cervical cells if they are present.