

What Do My Pap Test Results Mean?

You may have gotten a cervical/vaginal Pap test, or an anal Pap test.

Both of these are tests for cancer-causing changes in cells, caused by HPV, the human papilloma virus.

Basically, "negative" is good! ...But here is more information about what specific Pap test reports mean to say.

Did you ever have an abnormal result in the past?

Many women have had an abnormal Pap test result, years ago. (Anal Paps were not done until very recently.) Pathologists, who look at cells under the microscope, used an older system to classify cell samples, before 2001.

- Class I, Normal cells.
- Class II, Atypical cells (unusual-looking, but probably normal).
- Class III, Mild, moderate, or severe abnormality (definitely not normal).
- Class IV, Carcinoma in situ, "cancer in the site" (cancer cells that have not spread into nearby tissue).
- Class V, Suspicious for invasive cancer (cancer cells that look like they have spread into nearby tissue).

Pap results today:

Today, pathologists classify cell samples using the "Bethesda" system. (Bethesda, MD, is where the National Institutes of Health are located.) Different categories need different approaches, to diagnosis and treatment.

1. The cell sample, collected by your practitioner, can be satisfactory (plenty of cells to look at), or limited (almost enough), or unsatisfactory (not enough cells, to provide reliable results).
2. The skin cells can be called normal or benign (noncancerous), or abnormal. If the cells are normal or benign, they don't need further investigation right now - just prevention for the future.
3. If the cells are abnormal, then they may be classified as:
 - ASCUS (*Atypical Skin Cells of Unknown Significance*). They require a repeat Pap in 6-12 months - sometimes a colposcopy. (See below for more on colposcopy.)
 - ASC-H (*Atypical Skin Cells, can't rule out High-grade lesion*). See below for more on high-grade cell changes.
 - LSIL (*Low-grade Skin Intracellular Lesion*). About 15% of these can turn into HSIL (see below). They need closer investigation by colposcopy, to make sure this does not happen.
 - HSIL (*High-grade Skin Intracellular Lesion*). About 2% of HSILs are cancer. 20% of HSILs turn into cancer, if not treated. The abnormal cells can be eliminated, by freezing or cautery.
4. If the cells are abnormal, and they appear to be cells from the glands of the cervix (instead of skin cells), then they may be classified as:
 - AGC (*Atypical Glandular Cells*). They require closer investigation by colposcopy. (Glandular cells are not reported in anal Pap tests, only in cervical/vaginal tests.)

Other terms you may see:

Squamous: Means "skin cell."

Intra-epithelial: Means "intracellular" (in the cells of the skin).

Low-grade lesion: The cells don't look very different from normal-looking cells.

High-grade lesion: The cells look very different. High-grade lesion cells are not well "differentiated." See below.

Differentiation: Normal cells are "well-differentiated": well-specialized to their job. You can tell by looking at them where they belong in the body. (Example: nerve cell vs. muscle cell.) Cancer cells are "poorly differentiated," and the worst are those with no real identity at all - all they know how to do is *grow*.

Dysplasia: Cells growing abnormally, somehow. Dysplasia is sometimes called "pre-cancerous," but it is *not* cancer.

CIN (*Cervical Intracellular Neoplasm*): The same as dysplasia. It is *not* cancer.

CIS (*Carcinoma In Situ, "cancer in the site"*): Cancer cells that have *not* spread into nearby tissue. *Can be cured*.

Colposcopy: A Pap test and pinch biopsy, under high magnification. A "colposcope" looks like binoculars. The biopsy is a nip of the skin, taken with an instrument that looks like long-handled tweezers, then sent to the pathologist.

High-Resolution Anoscopy (HRA): A colposcopy to detect cancer of the skin of the anal wall, caused by HPV.

More reading:

About classification schemes: <http://bit.ly/sANLij> The invention of the Bethesda system: <http://bit.ly/t6f8he>

Questions and answers about Pap testing for cervical cancer: <http://1.usa.gov/hwc2c>

Detecting HPV effects on cells: <http://bit.ly/rROesW>

Pap testing for anal cancer: <http://bit.ly/uKJVpV>