Screening for Cervical Health

Cervical cancer is a cancer that starts in the cervix, which is at the lower part of the womb (see Diagram 1). It is the seventh most common cancer among females in Hong Kong and accounted for approximately 2.4% of cancer deaths in Hong Kong females (*Hong Kong Department of Health [DoH] 2010)*. But the good news is, cervical cancer is one of the few cancers that can be prevented by screening. As such, early detection of abnormalities and timely treatment can save lives.

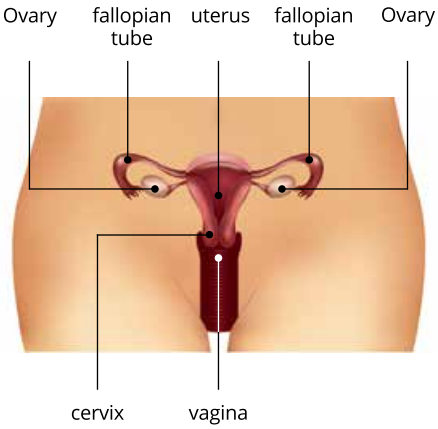


Diagram 1. Location of the cervix

A pap test

A pap test is a test to check the cervix for abnormalities. It is a simple procedure that takes only a few minutes to perform. The test detects abnormal cells or cells that could turn into cancer, i.e., "pre-cancer". If abnormal cells are present, this test can detect them even at the early stages, when it can be treated.

Who needs to have a pap test?

Hong Kong's DoH recommends that women aged 25-64 years with sexual experience should have regular pap tests. After two consecutive years of normal test results, the pap test can be done at a three year interval. Women below the age of 25 with sexual experiences and/or have risk factors for cervical cancer e.g. smoking, or having multiple sexual partners, should seek advice from doctors regarding the need for pap tests.

Women who have never had sexual experience or who have had total hysterectomy generally do not require pap tests.

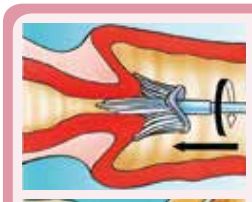
Preparation for a pap test

To obtain a better cell sample, ladies should:

- schedule the test for 10 to 20 days **after** the first day of the previous period.
- reschedule the appointment if menstruating.
- not douche or apply any vaginal creams or lubricants 48 hours prior to the pap test.
- not have sexual intercourse 24 hours prior to the pap test.

Procedures of a pap test

- To do a pap test, a doctor or nurse will push apart the walls of the vagina using a speculum, which is a device that looks like a duck bill. Then, a small brush will be used to collect cells from the cervix. These cells will then be examined in a laboratory to check for abnormalities.



1) Obtain an adequate sampling of cells from the cervix using a brush

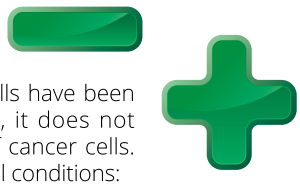
2) The cell samples on the brush will be released in a vial containing a solution, and be taken for laboratory testing.

Diagram 2. Procedures of a pap test

Interpretation of pap test results

Test results will usually be available within four working days. These are the different pap test results:

- Negative – it means no abnormal cells have been detected in the cervix.
- Abnormal – it means abnormal cells have been detected in the cervix. However, it does not necessarily mean the presence of cancer cells. Below are some common abnormal conditions:



  - **Inflammation**
    It is a common condition and usually does not mean there is a problem. Severe inflammation can be caused by an infection.
  - **Atypical Aquamous Cells of Undetermined Significance (ASCUS)**
    This means the cells show mild abnormality, which are not clearly cancer. These changes are usually not serious and may be caused by a vaginal infection or infection with a virus called Human papillomavirus (HPV).
  - **Atypical Glandular Cells (AGC)**
    These are cells that produce mucous and are located in your cervix or uterus. These changes are usually more serious. Women with AGC have a slightly higher risk for cervical cancer.
  - **Low-grade Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion (LSIL)**
    It means there are changes in the size and shape of the cells. LSIL is often associated with the presence of HPV, which may also cause genital warts.
  - **High-grade Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion (HSIL)**
    This means the cells are very different from normal cells. These cells are usually precancerous and can to lead to cervical cancer.
  - **Squamous Cancer Cells**
    Squamous cancer cells are cells which appear extremely abnormal on the pap smear. These cancer cells can be located in your vagina, cervix or uterus. Your doctor will perform additional tests and will talk to you about possible treatment options.

positive results

The following tests may be prescribed by the doctor for further investigation of the abnormal pap test results:

Another pap test at three and 12 months – It is recommended for conditions such as ASCUS, inflammation, infection or reactive cellular changes. Sometimes the abnormal cells might become normal by itself or after treatment of the infection.

The HPV test – The HPV test checks for infection with a type of HPV virus that can cause cervical cancer. If this type of HPV virus cannot be detected, then cancerous cells are unlikely to be present. It is recommended for conditions such as LSIL.

Colposcopy – It is recommended for conditions such as AGC or HSIL. During a colpscopy, the doctor or nurse looks at the cervix using a colposcope, which is a device that works like a microscope, and allows the cervix to be seen in fine detail. During this test, tiny tissue samples from the cervix might be taken if required. This is called a "biopsy." Tissue from the biopsy will be sent to the laboratory to be checked. *For more information regarding this test, please refer to the patient information sheet on 'Colposcopy'.*

Risks

People taking pap tests should be aware that many factors may affect the accuracy of the test result. The following occurrences may also be possible:

- **False negative** - that is when test results showed no abnormality but in reality abnormal cells are present at the cervix. It could be due to sampling, transfer or laboratory error. As cervical cancer takes a long time to develop, regular testings can detect abnormalities that are missed by a single test.
- **False positive** - it means that the test results showed abnormality, but actually there are no abnormal cells in the cervix. Since some of the abnormal cells can regress completely, or if they are very local or small, they can hardly be detected by subsequent tests. In this case, repeated testings for further examination can help to reassure that all is well.

It is important to note that a pap test is just an initial screening for cervical cancer. Many women with abnormal results do not have cancer. Remember, **early detection saves lives**.

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References:
UpToDate health information source

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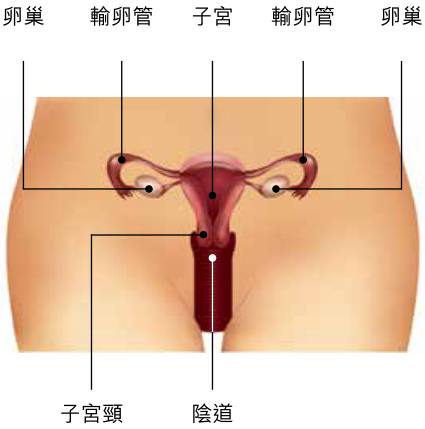
及早檢查 預防子宮頸癌

根據香港衛生署2010年的統計，子宮頸癌是香港婦女死於癌症的第七大原首，每100名死於癌症的婦女中便有2.4名死於子宮頸癌。子宮頸連接著子宮與陰道(見圖一)，若癌細胞出現在子宮頸的位置時，便是子宮頸癌。然而，子宮頸癌是少數可以作預防的癌症。因此，若及早診斷出及接受治療，可保性命。



圖一：子宮頸的位置

子宮頸細胞檢驗

子宮頸細胞檢驗，亦即拍氏抹片檢驗，能檢驗出有沒有異常細胞存在於子宮頸，從而使病人能及早得到適當治療。這是一項簡單兼快捷的檢查，整個程序只須數分鐘。

應接受子宮頸細胞檢驗的人士

香港衛生署建議年齡介乎25至64歲、曾有性行為的女士應定期作子宮頸細胞檢驗。如持續兩年的檢查結果屬正常，女士們可每三年才進行一次檢查。然而，25歲以下並已有性經驗的女士、或生活方式有增加患子宮頸癌風險，如吸煙及有多位性伴侶的女士，則應向醫生查詢檢查的需要。

從未有性經驗或已曾接受子宮切除手術的女士，一般不需要接受子宮頸細胞檢驗。

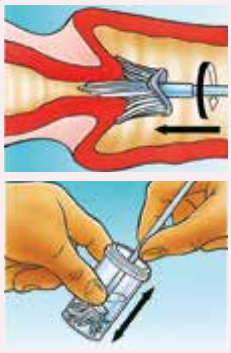
檢查前的準備

為能採集更佳的細胞樣本，女士們：

- 須於上一次經期首天計的第10至20天內進行檢查
- 如月經來潮，須另安排檢查時間
- 須於檢查前48小時避免灌洗陰道及使用潤滑劑或在陰道塗上任何軟膏
- 須於檢查前24小時內避免進行性行為

檢查的程序

進行檢查時，醫生或護士會利用一個鴨咀形的儀器將陰道壁張開，然後用一把小掃從子宮頸抹取一些細胞樣本，並送到化驗室作化驗。



一）以專用小掃從子宮頸取下細胞樣本。

二）將小掃上的細胞釋放於含有保存液之瓶子裏待化驗。

圖二：子宮頸細胞檢驗的程序

子宮頸細胞檢驗結果

子宮頸細胞檢驗結果一般於四個工作天內發出。而下列是一般的結果：

- 呈陰性：這顯示一切正常，子宮頸內沒有異常細胞。
- 異常現象（陽性）：這顯示子宮頸內有異常細胞，但這並不代表已患上癌症。常見的異象包括：

  - **發炎**
    子宮頸發炎乃十分普遍，並不代表有嚴重問題。嚴重發炎可由細菌感染引起。
  - **非典型鱗狀細胞 (ASCUS)**
    這代表細胞少許異常，但並非癌症。這些細胞變化並不嚴重，它可能是由於陰道感染或人類乳頭狀病毒(HPV)感染而造成。
  - **非典型腺狀上皮細胞 (AGC)**
    腺狀上皮細胞是指位於子宮頸或子宮製造黏液的細胞；這些在腺狀上皮細胞出現異常變化通常較嚴重，患上子宮頸癌的機會亦相對較大。
  - **低度鱗狀上皮內病變 (LSIL)**
    這是指細胞的形狀和大小出現變化， 通常與人類乳頭狀病毒(HPV)有關連。HPV又可引致性器官生疣。
  - **高度鱗狀上皮內病變 (HSIL)**
    這類細胞異常，是癌前病變的微兆，並可引致子宮頸癌。
  - **鱗狀細胞癌**
    癌是指子宮頸細胞檢驗驗出極度異常的細胞。 這些癌細胞位於陰道、子宮頸或子宮。醫生會為你進行其他測試及與你討論治療的選擇。

陽性結果跟進

如得出陽性結果，醫生會建議作下列其中一項檢查，以進一步檢驗異常細胞：

於3或12個月後進行另一次子宮頸細胞檢驗－如檢查結果呈現非典型鱗狀上皮細胞、 發炎或反應性的細胞變化，醫生則會建議於數月後進行另一次檢查。很多時異常細胞會自然地或經治療後回復正常

人類乳頭瘤病毒測試(HPV測試)－HPV測試能檢驗可引發子宮頸癌的HPV病毒。病人如沒有HPV病毒，那會患上子宮頸癌的機會亦較低。這項測試適用於低度鱗狀上皮內病變等或其他症狀。

子宮鏡窺鏡檢查－這項測試適用於陽性結果如非典型腺狀上皮細胞或高度鱗狀上皮內病變等結果。醫生會利用專用的放大鏡觀察子宮頸。醫生或會同時採集一些組織，進行病理化驗。*如欲知詳情，請參閱另一病人資訊「子宮鏡窺鏡檢查」。*

檢查風險

子宮頸細胞檢查的結果或會受到不同因素，影響其準確性：

- 假陰性結果：檢查結果顯示沒有異常的細胞，但其實存在異常細胞。原因或是採集細胞樣本或處理樣本時出現問題，或化驗錯誤。然而，子宮頸癌細胞一般需要一段時間發展成癌細胞，因此，定期作子宮頸細胞檢驗仍可及時驗出異常細胞的存在與否。
- 假陽性結果：檢查結果顯示異常但其實並沒有異常細胞存在。由於一些異常細胞面積較少或會自然回復正常，重覆的測試亦未能確定異常細胞的存在。如要確定有否異常細胞，病人可重覆作子宮頸細胞檢驗。

請緊記，子宮頸細胞檢驗是一項檢查子宮頸細胞的初步檢查。就算得出陽性的結果亦不等於患上癌症。**及早檢查及求診能保性命**!

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參考資料：
UpToDate 網站

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