



## What causes an abnormal result?

Infection, inflammation or hormone changes can cause abnormal cervix screening test results. However, most abnormal results are caused by a common virus called the human papillomavirus (HPV).

## What is HPV?

HPV is a virus that usually clears up on its own without causing any problems.

Two groups of HPV can infect the cervix – low risk and high risk. Low risk types are not associated with cervix cancer but may cause genital warts and abnormal screening results. Long term infection with a high risk type of HPV may lead to cervix cancer or pre-cancerous cells.

HPV is very common and easily spread through any kind of sexual contact. This includes intimate touching, oral, vaginal and anal sex.

Most people will get HPV at some point in their lives – often without knowing it. Usually the body's immune system removes the virus within two years. But sometimes HPV does not clear on its own, and over time, it can cause the cells of the cervix to become abnormal.

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Any questions regarding the collection of the information by BC Cancer can be directed to the Operations Director, Cancer Screening (address: 801 – 686 West Broadway, Vancouver BC V5Z 1G1, web: [www.screeningbc.ca](http://www.screeningbc.ca) or email: [screening@bccancer.bc.ca](mailto:screening@bccancer.bc.ca))

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# Cervix Screening - Abnormal Results

Answering your questions  
about abnormal cervix screening results



## What You Should Know

Abnormal results are common and do not mean you have cancer.

It is important to attend all follow-up appointments for test or treatment.

Treatment is simple and highly effective. Most patients will have no further problems.

If found early, cervix cancer is 85% curable.

An abnormal cervix screening (Pap test) result means that cells have been found on your cervix that do not look normal.

Abnormal results are common and do not mean you have cancer or pre-cancerous cells.

It is rare for a woman with an abnormal cervix cancer screening result to have cervical cancer. However, when abnormal cells are found, further testing may be needed.

Often these abnormal cells return to normal by themselves. But, in some cases they may not return to normal on their own, and instead become pre-cancerous cells that need to be removed to prevent cancer from developing.

You need to discuss your results and the need for further tests or treatment with your doctor. It is important that you attend all follow-up appointments.

### What happens after an abnormal cervix screening result?

This will depend on the type of cell changes you have:

#### Mild atypical cell changes

Your doctor will repeat screening in 6 months.

Mild cell changes usually return to normal by themselves but another screening test is needed to make sure.

Cervical cells change slowly. This is why you are asked to wait 6 months before your next cervix screening test.

#### Moderate to severe atypical cell changes

Your doctor will refer you to a specialist for a colposcopy, which is a test that allows the specialist to take a closer look at your cervix.

It is unlikely that you have cancer, but moderate and severe cell changes are less likely to return to normal by themselves and usually need treatment.

### What is a colposcopy?

A colposcopy is an examination where a special magnifying instrument – a colposcope – is used to magnify your cervix for a closer look.

This test takes about five to ten minutes. It does not require a hospital stay, freezing or pain medication.

There may be an area on your cervix that the specialist wants to check more closely. If so, they will take a small sample of tissue from your cervix – a cervical biopsy.

Most patients only feel a slight pinch when the sample is taken.

### What happens after a colposcopy?

You will be contacted when the biopsy results are ready. Your doctor will talk to you about the results and let you know if you need treatment to remove the abnormal cells.

There are a number of ways this can be done. Your doctor will recommend the treatment that is best for you.

Treatment is usually simple and highly effective. Most patients will have no further problems.