

Choosing Wisely[®]

An initiative of the ABIM Foundation

ConsumerReportsHealth



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
FAMILY PHYSICIANS



Pelvic exams, pap tests, and oral contraceptives

When you need tests to get birth control pills— and when you don't

Before you get birth control pills, your doctor may want you to have a pelvic exam with a Pap test.

Your doctor should get a complete medical history before giving you a prescription for birth control pills. But you usually don't need a Pap test and pelvic exam, especially if you are a teen. The tests can even be harmful. Here's why:

Teens usually don't need the Pap test.

A Pap test looks at cells in the cervix for signs of cancer. The cervix is where the vagina connects to the uterus. The Pap test is usually part of a pelvic exam to check for infections and other problems.

Teenagers generally don't need a Pap test. They hardly ever have cervical cancer.

Also, Pap tests in teens have unclear results. Something might seem abnormal, but usually it gets better on its own.



The pelvic exam can be a barrier to getting birth control.

Many young women are anxious about having their first pelvic exam. So they put off getting birth control. This is bad for their health because it can lead to unplanned pregnancies.

Preventing unwanted pregnancies is important for emotional, physical, and financial health. Studies show that teen girls have more risks from pregnancy, compared to adults.

Avoid unnecessary costs.

A complete physical exam that includes a pelvic exam costs about \$125. A Pap test adds another \$40, or more if you get tests for sexually transmitted diseases. If the Pap test result isn't normal, follow-up can cost over \$350. Some women, especially teens, don't need all these tests.

But if you see your regular doctor for an office visit without a pelvic exam, it only costs about \$40. For new patients, it's about \$80.

Do I need any exam before getting birth control pills?

You should have pelvic exams and Pap tests based on your age and health history (see the Advice from Consumer Reports). But you don't need them just to get a prescription for birth control pills.

Before you get birth control pills, your doctor should always do a basic medical exam and:

- Check your blood pressure.
- Ask if you've ever had blood clots.
- Ask if you smoke.

High blood pressure, blood clots, and smoking are risk factors. If you have a risk factor, you should consider other forms of birth control. Birth control pills may not be a good choice.

Should I get a pelvic exam if I don't need a Pap test?

You can have a pelvic exam without a Pap test. But you rarely need to. You might need a pelvic exam if you have pelvic or abdominal pain, abnormal bleeding or discharge, or severe menstrual pain.

Advice from Consumer Reports

When should you have a Pap test?

Cervical cancer usually takes 10 to 20 years to develop. So you do not need a Pap test every year.

The current guidelines are listed below. Remember that every woman is different. Talk to your own doctor about your risks.

- **If you are age 21 to 29**, you should get a Pap test every three years.
- **If you are age 30 to 65**, you should get the Pap test along with an HPV test every five years. (Or get a Pap test alone every three years.) HPV is the virus that can cause cervical cancer.
- **If you are over 65** and have had several normal Pap tests in a row, you can stop having the test.
- **If you have had a hysterectomy**, but still have a cervix, you should follow the guidelines above.
- **At any age**, you should follow your doctor's advice if you have the following risk factors for cervical cancer:
 - You had cervical cancer in the past.
 - You have an HPV infection.
 - You have pre-cancerous changes in your cervix.
 - You have a condition that weakens your immune system, like cancer or HIV.



This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

© 2014 Consumer Reports. Developed in cooperation with the American Academy of Family Physicians. To learn more about the sources used in this report and terms and conditions of use, visit ConsumerHealthChoices.org/about-us/.