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Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA)

Fact Sheet And Position Statement on Pap Smear Tests During Pregnancy

Introduction

A Pap smear is a quick and simple test in which a number of cells are collected from the cervix and sent to a laboratory where it is tested for changes. No drugs or anaesthetics are required and a doctor or nurse can easily do a Pap smear test. It only takes a few minutes and is the best practice against cervical cancer.

[Picture Credit: Pregnancy]

All women who have ever had sex should start having Pap smear tests between the ages of 18 and 20 years, or two to three years after commencement of sexual activity sex - whichever is later. (National Cervical Screening Program; American Pregnancy Association).



Pap smear tests do not diagnose cancer, but it detects 95% of cervical cancers at a stage when it cannot be seen with the naked eye. Any abnormality detected can then be treated and are almost always cured. Though Pap smear tests do not specifically test for other gynaecological problems or sexually transmitted infections, Pap smear tests will indicate the presence of abnormal cells for which further testing or examination could be required (American Pregnancy Association).

Human Papilloma Virus Infection

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted virus. Almost every sexually active person will acquire HPV at some point in their lives.

Several types of cancer are associated with HPV:

- Cervical cancer: the most common HPV-associated cancer. Almost all cervical cancer is caused by HPV
- Vulvar cancer: about 50% are linked to HPV
- Vaginal cancer: about 65% are linked to HPV
- Penile cancer: about 35% are linked to HPV
- Anal cancer: about 95% are linked to HPV

- Oropharyngeal cancers (cancers of the back of the throat, including the base of the tongue and tonsils): about 60% are linked to HPV - some of these cancers may also be related to tobacco and alcohol use

Most of the time, HPV goes away by itself within two years and does not cause health problems. It is thought that the immune system fights off HPV naturally. It is only when certain types of HPV do not go away over years that it can cause cancers. It is not known why HPV goes away in most, but not all cases. There is no way to know which persons will go on to develop cancer or other health problems.

There are HPV vaccines available to protect individuals against HPV infections. Even though a woman has had a HPV vaccine, regular Pap smear tests remain essential, as the vaccine does not protect against all cancer-causing types of HPV (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

For additional information on HPV, refer to CANSA's Fact Sheet on Human Papilloma Virus Infection and Cancer.

Pap Smear Tests during Pregnancy

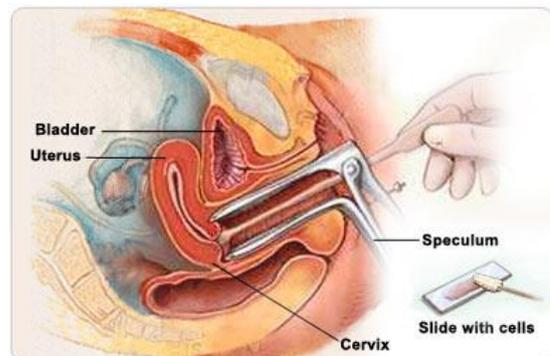
A Pap smear test should form a routine part of pre-natal care. It poses no risk to the foetus.

It is recommended that every woman presenting for antenatal care should be offered cervical screening by Pap smear if they have not had cervical screening within the past two years.

Pap smear tests can generally be undertaken during pregnancy, ideally before 24 weeks gestation. The woman may have some spotting and minor bleeding following the Pap smear. The doctor or professional nurse should be able to advise women what is normal following a Pap smear test and address any specific concerns they may have about having a Pap smear test during pregnancy (National Cervical Screening Program).

If a woman has an abnormal Pap smear test result before or during pregnancy the doctor will discuss treatment options which can be done safely during pregnancy, or depending on the diagnosis, delay treatment until after the birth of the baby. If the doctor suggests a colposcopy or cervical biopsy, there can be slight bleeding from the external part of the cervix, but this should not be a serious complication.

[Picture Credit: Pap Smear]



If the doctor is considering doing an internal biopsy into the endocervical canal, there may be a risk of a pregnancy complication. But the doctor will have the patient and foetus' best interest in mind and will only do what is medically necessary. The doctor may perform additional Pap smear tests during the course of the pregnancy if necessary. Many times the birth of the baby will wash away any abnormal cervical cells (American Pregnancy Association).

CANSA's Position on Pap Smear Tests During Pregnancy

Because cervical cancer is a major health risk among South African women, and Pap smear tests have not been associated with increased rates of miscarriage, CANSA believes that:

- Pap smear tests can be safely performed during pregnancy up to not more than 24 weeks gestation
- During the early stages of pregnancy, ideally before 24 weeks gestation, can be a good time to have a Pap smear test, during an examination by a doctor or midwife for matters relating to the pregnancy
- Any pregnant woman who is due for a Pap smear test should talk to her doctor or midwife about whether she should have a Pap smear test while pregnant or wait until after the baby is born
- If the woman chooses to have the Pap smear test after the birth of her baby, it is best to wait for at least 12 weeks following delivery as there is an increased rate of unsatisfactory results due to insufficient or inflammatory cells collected on a Pap smear test that is taken soon after delivery

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Sources and References

American Pregnancy Association

<http://americanpregnancy.org/womens-health/pap-smear/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov/hpv/>

National Cervical Screening Program

<http://www.cancerscreening.gov.au/internet/screening/publishing.nsf/Content/cervical-faqs#4>

Pap Smear

<http://www.medindia.net/health-screening-test/pap-smear-and-cervical-cancer-screening.htm>

Pregnancy

<http://www.modernmom.com/2def4180-051f-11e2-9d62-404062497d7e.html>