

ABNORMAL PAP RESULTS & HPV

The results from your recent Pap smear have come back as ASCUS (atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance)—meaning that your cervical cells appear to be different from normal. Keep in mind that this result is not always a cause for concern and does not necessarily mean you have cancer.

Other causes of ASCUS include yeast infections, bacterial infections, and hormonal changes in your body. Viral infections, such as human papillomavirus (HPV), can also cause an abnormal Pap result.

What is HPV?

The human papillomavirus (or HPV) is a common family of viruses that can infect many parts of the body. There are over 130 different types of the HPV virus—most are harmless, cause no signs or symptoms, and clear up by themselves. Over 30 other types affect the area on or between the genitals and anus. These types are grouped into high and low risk:

- Low risk—the most common types (6 and 11) cause 90% of genital warts (these differ from the other types that cause common skin warts)
- High risk—the most common types (16 and 18) cause 70% of cervical cancer and have been linked to anal, vaginal, penile, and head and neck cancers

HPV is spread through sexual contact, usually by touching or kissing the penis, scrotum, vagina, vulva, or anus of a person with the infection. HPV can be spread *without* actual intercourse.

Why should I have the HPV DNA test?

In women over age 30 with ASCUS, the HPV DNA test is one of the best and simplest ways to find out if they have HPV and need further assessment and treatment. However, this test may not be available without a direct cost to you where you live—you should discuss with your health care provider if this HPV testing is an option for you to consider.

- If you have a negative result, you can be reassured that you do not have an infection with a high-risk HPV type and are not at higher risk for cervical and other cancers (listed above).
- If you have a positive result, you do have infection with one of the high-risk HPV types and will need a colposcopy (a simple test where a special microscope is used to take a closer look at your cervix). This does not necessarily mean that you will develop cervical cancer, as the virus will clear on its own in many women.
If there are any abnormalities, colposcopy can pick them up and allow treatment at an early stage.

How is the test done?

HPV DNA testing can be performed on the same sample that was taken for your initial Pap smear, or your doctor will take a separate sample from your cervix.

