

Why should I have a Digene HPV test?

Currently in Australia, women are advised to be screened for cervical cancer by a Pap test every two years. If you have a Digene HPV test at the same time and both tests are negative, you have a very low risk of developing precancerous abnormalities or cancer of the cervix. This result can be very reassuring. In fact, combining the two tests for routine screening for cervical cancer is so accurate, that screening with both Pap and Digene HPV tests has been adopted in the USA for women over 30 years old.

Digene HPV test has also recently been recommended in Australia for routine use in patients who have been treated for precancerous or cancerous lesions of the cervix, to make sure the disease has been cured.

In some special circumstances, HPV testing may be useful if some abnormal cells are detected by the Pap screen or if the Pap screen is hard to interpret.

Digene HPV testing is less useful than a Pap smear in women younger than 30 years old, because the HPV test can detect recent infections which will be quickly cleared by the body (which is very common in women younger than 30 years) and will not lead to lasting infection.

Cervical screening by cytology has led to prevention of many cervical cancers. The Digene HPV test is a new, modern test for the virus which causes cervical cancer. Negative Pap and Digene HPV tests indicate that you are at very low risk of cervical cancer. The Digene HPV test can reduce the number of investigations needed to decide whether you should be treated for cervical changes. Combining the Digene HPV test and the Pap test is very accurate at detecting cervical precancer and cancer.

The Digene HPV Test is currently available and performed onsite at Mater Pathology, South Brisbane

For further information please contact Associate Professor Jane Armes Director of Anatomic Pathology on 3840 8500 or Mobile 0418 328 917



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HPV and screening for cervical cancer



The Pap test has been the usual way to screen for cervical cancer for many years. The Pap test is used to find abnormal changes in the appearance of cervical cells. Abnormal changes are present in women with increased risk of cervical cancer.

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is necessary for the development of cervical cancer. The new Digene HPV (Hybrid Capture® II) test is a very sensitive method of testing for HPV in cervical cells. This test detects the DNA of the virus and does not rely on changes in cell appearance. The Hybrid Capture test can be performed by your doctor at the same time as a cervical smear.

What is HPV (Human Papilloma Virus)?

HPV is detected in almost all cervical cancers. There are about 100 different types of HPV. Some types infect the skin (common warts) and others infect the anogenital area, including the cervix. Thirteen HPV types are called "high-risk" because these types are the ones which may lead to cancer. There are other types of HPV which infect the cervix but they are not associated with cancer (low-risk types). These low risk types can cause genital warts.

In most people the immune system combats the HPV infection, including the "high-risk" HPV types and removes the virus from the body. Usually this happens without any symptoms and so most people are not aware that they have ever been infected with HPV. Most women infected with HPV will not develop cervical cancer or the precancerous forms of the disease. However, if high-risk HPV infection remains over many years, there is a greater chance of developing cell changes which may lead to cervical cancer.

The Digene HPV test identifies all of the high-risk HPV types in a single test and so helps to identify those women at increased risk of developing cervical precancer and cancer.

Who can get an HPV infection of the cervix?

HPV is a very common infection and is transmitted sexually. The majority of people who have ever been sexually active will have been exposed to the virus. However, very few women progress to cervical cancer.

What are the symptoms of HPV infection?

Mostly, HPV is harmless and does not cause symptoms. In most cases, a woman only discovers that she has HPV on cervical screening, since cell changes due to HPV infection can be recognised on Pap smear. These cellular changes can occur weeks, months or many years after initial infection. However, two-thirds of young women with HPV infection do not have an abnormal Pap smear.

What is the difference between the Digene HPV test and the Pap test?

Both tests are designed to detect women who are at increased risk of cervical cancer. These women can then be treated before a cancer develops.

The Pap test is used to recognise abnormal cellular appearances, which may be due to HPV infection or due to pre-cancerous or cancerous changes in a cell.

The Digene HPV test detects high risk HPV in a cervical sample directly and does not rely on detecting abnormal cell appearances. The Digene HPV test directly identifies infection of any of the high risk HPV types.

How is the specimen collected for Digene HPV testing?

The Digene HPV test specimen is obtained from the cervix in the same manner as collecting a sample for a Pap smear and can be done at the same time or on a separate visit. Cells are brushed off the cervix and sent to Mater Pathology for analysis by a pathologist. The same sample collected for ThinPrep analysis may be used, or a dedicated Digene Sampler. A report will then be issued to your doctor.

The Digene HPV test may reduce the uncertainty and anxiety caused by abnormal or inconclusive Pap test results. It is a very useful way to discover if you may be at increased risk of developing cervical precancer or rarely, cancer, enabling your doctor to monitor you more closely.

The HPV test may prevent delays in receiving further appropriate investigation and management if your Pap test is mildly abnormal.

What happens after I have been tested?

The results of your Pap test and the Digene HPV test will be used by your doctor to decide whether you need:

- further investigations by a gynaecologist. These investigations usually include colposcopy, in which the gynaecologist looks directly at the cervix and may take a tissue sample for histology.
- repeat Pap and Digene HPV tests before 2 years
- or whether you do not need to have anything other than usual screening.

