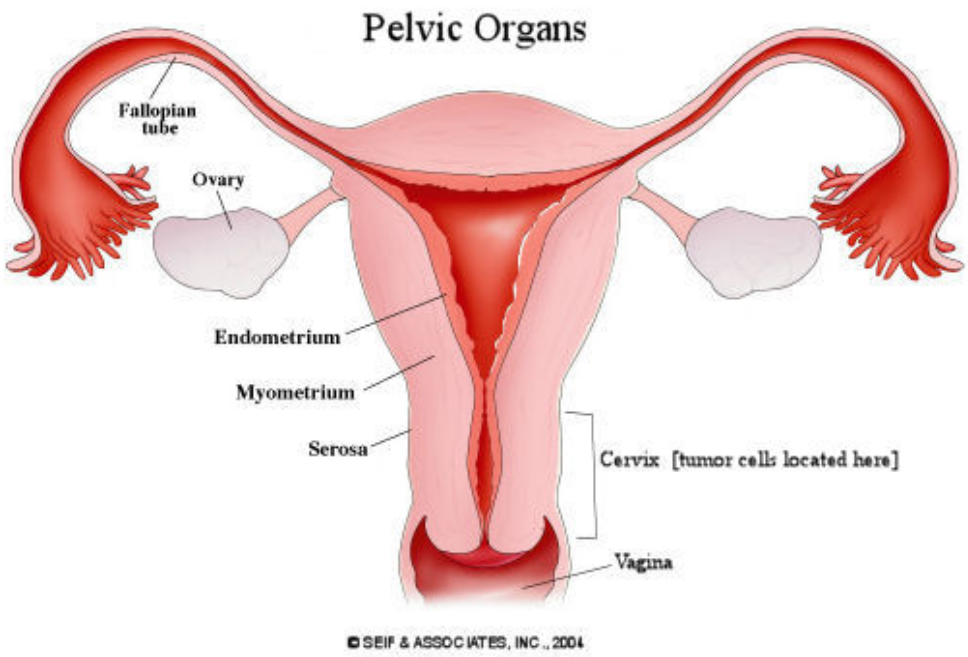
# Pelvic Exam

A pelvic (*gynecologic*) exam is an examination of a woman's outer and inner genitals and reproductive organs. When a young woman reaches the age of 18, or before she starts to have sexual intercourse, she should have her first pelvic exam. Pelvic exams allow your caregiver to check on normal development and screen for health problems. These exams should be done regularly throughout a woman's life. Usually, an exam of the breasts is done also. It is helpful to have a gynecology visit to the doctor between 13 to 15 years old without having an examination. This will help to get warmed up to your caregiver, to ask questions and understand what happens during a pelvic exam so that there will be less worry and anxiety with the first pelvic exam.




## REASONS FOR A PELVIC EXAM

- A PAP smear is done to screen for cervical cancer.
  - The first PAP smear should be done at age 21.
  - **Between ages 21 and 29**, **PAP smears are repeated every 2 years**.
  - Beginning at age 30, you are advised to have a PAP smear **every 3 years as long as your past 3 PAP smears have been normal.**
  - Some women have medical problems that increase the chance of getting cervical cancer. Talk to your caregiver about these problems. It is especially important to talk to your caregiver if a new problem develops soon after your last PAP smear. **In these cases, your caregiver may recommend more frequent screening and Pap smears.**
  - The above recommendations are the same for women who **have** or **have not** gotten the vaccine for HPV (Human Papillomavirus).
  - If you had a hysterectomy for a problem that was **not** a cancer or a condition that could lead to cancer, then you no longer need Pap smears.
  - If you are between ages 65 and 70, and you have had normal Pap smears going back 10 years, you no longer need Pap smears.
  - If you have had past treatment for cervical cancer or a condition that could lead to cancer, you need Pap smears and screening for cancer for at least 20 years after your treatment.
- Evaluate a mass or other problems (*symptoms*) that suggest a reproductive system cancer.
- Explore why your are not able to get pregnant (*infertility*).
- Find a cause for vaginal discharge, itching or burning.
- Get certain types of birth control or start hormone replacement therapy.
- Have a pap smear to screen for pre-cancer and cervical cancer.
- Look for causes of urinary incontinence or sexual problems.
- Look for signs of sexually transmitted infections (STI).
- Follow progression of labor.
- Determine if pregnancy is present or how far advanced the pregnancy is.

- Severe cramps during your menstrual period.
- Pain during sexual intercourse.
- Annual exam and Pap test. A Pap test removes cells from the cervix gently with a spatula. The cells are tested for pre-cancer and cancer.

## PROCEDURE

- A pelvic exam is usually painless, but may cause mild discomfort.
- In unusual circumstances or on young girls, medications may be used for comfort. Although a pelvic exam is not done routinely before a girl is sexually active. Special circumstances such as rape, trauma or medical problems may require an exam.
- Before the exam starts, the woman lies down on her back on a special table. She puts the heels of her feet into foot rests (*stirrups*) and spreads open her legs. A cloth or paper drape is usually placed over her belly (*abdomen*) and legs. First, the caregiver checks the normal arrangement of body parts (*anatomy*) of the outer genitals. This includes the clitoris and vaginal opening, the hymen (a thin layer of tissue that partly closes the vaginal opening), and the labia and the perineal area between the vagina and rectum. The labia are the skin folds surrounding the vaginal opening. The tube that carries urine from the bladder to the outside of the body (*urethra*) is also examined.
- An internal exam is done next. First, the caregiver inserts a tool called a speculum into the vagina. The speculum has lubricant on it. It looks like a long duck bill. The speculum helps hold the vaginal walls apart. The caregiver can then examine the vagina (*birth canal*) and cervix, or the opening to the womb (*uterus*). Cultures of any discharge may be taken to check for an infection. A pap smear may be done on the cervix to screen for precancerous changes in cervical cells.
- After the internal exam is done, the speculum is removed. The caregiver then places one or two fingers into the vagina. Putting the other hand on the woman's lower belly, the  puts on a latex glove with lubricant on the fingers and gently presses against various pelvic organs. The caregiver will note any tenderness or abnormalities. If a pelvic exam is done on a woman who is thought to be in labor, her caregiver can check on the baby and how far her cervix has opened.
- Following the exam, you can get dressed and speak with your caregiver.

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