

TAKE THE TEST

If you're sexually active, it's time to take responsibility for your health and get a pap smear. But don't worry – we've got all the info you need.

WHAT IS IT?

A pap smear is a physical test that looks for changes to the cells of the cervix.

"Pap smears pick up abnormalities in the cervix before they become cancerous," explains gynaecologist Dr Gino Pecoraro.

Yes, he used the 'C' word, but don't freak out – cervical cancer is actually totally treatable if it's found early, with the help of a pap smear.

We're not going to tell you it won't be awkward – after all, it involves you going to the doctor's office and laying on your back with your legs spread apart while they part the walls of your vagina with a plastic device known as a speculum, take a swab of your insides (your cervix), and remove the speculum.

BUT it literally takes two minutes – not even – and every single one of us girls at DOLLY HQ has had at least one. And you know why? Because we would want to know if something wasn't

quite right with our bodies, so then we'd have the chance to do something about it.

The results of the pap smear are returned to your doctor in one to two weeks, and they'll get in touch if they want to do further testing.

WHAT HAPPENS IF IT SHOWS SOMETHING BAD?

Let's look at the statistics. According to Joe Tooma, CEO of the Australian Cervical Cancer Foundation, six million women in Australia should be getting a pap smear every year, but only 3.6 million do. Of those 3.6 million women, 100,000 will receive a low-grade diagnosis (slight cervical changes) and just 30,000 will receive a high-grade diagnosis (severe cervical changes). So there's a pretty low chance of getting bad news, but if it does happen to you, a simple procedure will help give you a clean bill of health.

"If low-grade abnormalities are shown, the first thing doctors

do is repeat the smear in six months. If it's still there, you'll be referred to a gynaecologist, who will do further testing, including looking at the cervix through a special magnifying glass called a colposcope, and if there are any areas that look unusual, we take a biopsy and go from there," explains Gino.

It's important to note that 90 per cent of women diagnosed with cervical cancer are those who don't get tested regularly. That's because testing would have identified abnormalities in their cervix before they developed into cancer. And, as Joe puts it, "not getting a pap test done means you'll have absolutely no symptoms if there's something wrong until it's far too late to treat it".

Moral: Get checked.

I'VE HAD THOSE INJECTIONS AT SCHOOL, THOUGH, SO I SHOULD BE COVERED... RIGHT?

Good on you! Getting those three Gardasil injections

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WORDS SARAH FRIGGIERI PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES

WHEN SHOULD I GET IT DONE?

You'll need to book in for a pap smear if...

YOU'VE HAD SEXUAL INTERCOURSE.

YOU'VE BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED.

YOU'RE OVER THE AGE OF 18.

THE CURRENT GUIDELINES ARE THAT PAP SMEARS SHOULD BE DONE EVERY TWO YEARS. HOWEVER,

THIS WILL CHANGE IN MAY 2017, WHEN IT'LL BE RECOMMENDED THAT PAP SMEARS OCCUR EVERY FIVE YEARS.

IF YOU'RE THE FORGETFUL KIND, SIGN UP FOR A PAP REMINDER AT ACCF.ORG.AU – THAT WAY YOU'LL GET A TEXT THE MONTH YOU'RE DUE. YAY FOR TECHNOLOGY!

is a great step towards protecting you against the four main types of human papillomavirus (HPV), a major cause of cervical cancer.

"With the Gardasil vaccines, the risk of getting cervical cancer during your life is reduced by about 70 to 80 per cent," says Joe.

"It also immunises against the two types of viruses that cause 90 per cent of genital warts," Gino adds.

But it's still best to get a pap smear as well – their powers combined could save your life.

"Pap smears are vital too because the vaccine isn't 100 per cent, and other viruses from the HPV family could cause problems," says Joe.

Under the National Immunisation Program, Gardasil can be given to 12- to 13-year-olds for free. If you're outside this age group, your doctor can give you all three shots over a six-month period for \$450. Think about it – at the risk of sounding like your mum, you really can't put a price on your health. **D**