

Gynecological (GYN) Exams

To maintain health, all women should have a gynecological or GYN (pronounced "G-Y-N") exam. The exam takes a short period of time, is usually only minimally uncomfortable, and provides an important measure of prevention against disease, particularly cervical cancer.

As a rule, all women should have a GYN exam once a year. This routine should begin when a woman becomes sexually active. Women who have never had sexual intercourse should begin annual GYN exams at the age of 21.

Lesbians who have never had heterosexual relationships are at a lower risk for cervical cancer, but an annual examination is recommended, nevertheless, because of other common health issues for women. Women in lesbian relationships may feel reluctant to tell their health care provider, but we encourage women to find a health care provider with whom they feel comfortable enough to share this information.

SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

To schedule an appointment for a GYN exam, call UHS at 275-2662. You will be asked to give the reason for the appointment, so the appropriate time is allowed and equipment is set up. Your appointment can be scheduled with your primary care provider or with a women's health nurse practitioner.

When you call to schedule your appointment, you will be asked the reason for your visit. You can say you need an annual GYN exam, or you need a Pap, or a pelvic exam. If you are having a problem, stating the nature of the problem is helpful. If you are interested in receiving contraception or contraception information during your visit, please let us know when you call. You should not schedule your appointment when you expect to have your menstrual period.

PRIOR TO THE APPOINTMENT

Bathe as usual. Do not douche as douching can wash away vaginal secretions that might need to be examined to determine that you are healthy. When you arrive for your appointment, a Medical Office Assistant, who is specially trained to assist the doctors and nurse practitioners, will initially see you. Your weight and blood pressure will be taken and basic information will be asked regarding your visit. You are encouraged to mention any problems that you may have to this person. You may be asked for a urine specimen if you are having symptoms or problems. If you are not asked for a urine specimen, you should ask to urinate if you have not done so within the previous half hour. You will then be shown to the examination room to see the medical care provider (nurse practitioner or physician) with whom you have an appointment.

THE EXAMINATION

You will be asked to undress completely and to put on a gown. You will also be given a paper drape to cover your lap. Your provider will usually conduct a partial physical exam that may include your thyroid, lymph nodes, heart, lungs, breasts, and abdomen. You will then be asked to lie down and position yourself near the end of the table, placing your feet into stirrups, with your knees bent and spread apart. This is an awkward position, but it is the best way for your provider to perform the pelvic exam.

Pelvic Exam

The pelvic exam takes only a few minutes. To make the exam more comfortable, you should try to relax. Your provider will first examine the external genitals, called the vulva. Then an instrument called a speculum will be inserted into the vagina. The speculum holds the vaginal walls apart so that the inside of the vagina and the cervix (the opening to the uterus) can easily be viewed and appropriate tests can be done. You may feel a sensation of fullness with the speculum in place. If you are having any pain or discomfort, please tell your provider. An adjustment of the speculum may be necessary.

The Pap

The Pap is a screening test for detection of abnormal cells from the cervix that could be precursors to cancer. Because very slight changes can be detected and treated so early, cervical cancer is rare among women who have regular Pap. The Pap is a simple procedure that takes only a few seconds to perform. A tiny brush and/or wooden spatula are used to pick up cells on the surface of the cervix. These specimens are smeared onto a slide and sent to a laboratory where they are examined by specially trained technicians.

At UHS, you will be contacted if any abnormality, even minor, is found on your Pap. Notification of an abnormality in your Pap should not cause you to panic or be unduly alarmed, as these abnormalities rarely represent cancer. If you have an abnormal Pap, you should always follow your health care provider's instructions exactly to prevent the potential for more serious problems.

Tests for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

Sexually transmitted infections (also called sexually transmitted diseases) are serious problems and have reached epidemic levels on most college campuses. Infections, such as Chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis can be serious, but often people are not aware they are infected until complications have already occurred. Screening tests may help detect infections at early stages; early treatment may prevent further spread of the disease.

Tests for Chlamydia, gonorrhea, or herpes may be done at the time of a gynecological exam, if indicated. A blood test for syphilis and HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) may also be done, if indicated. If you have a concern about an infection, you should discuss your concern with your health care provider.

Bimanual Examination

The remaining part of the pelvic exam is the examination. The examination is performed after the speculum is removed. The provider, wearing a disposable latex glove, places two fingers into the vagina. The other hand is placed on the lower abdomen. S/he then presses down on the abdomen to feel the internal organs: the cervix and body of the uterus, the fallopian tubes, and the ovaries. In order to feel the undersurface of the uterus and the surrounding area, it may be necessary for the examiner to place one finger into the rectum. This is usually not painful but may produce a sensation of fullness.

Clinical Breast Exam

Your provider will typically do a clinical breast exam. The procedure is similar to the breast self-exam. Your provider may also talk to you about doing a breast self-exam monthly. Curability is directly related to early detection. It is important for women to learn how to do breast self-examinations correctly and to develop the habit of doing them regularly.