

# What to expect at YOUR FIRST PELVIC EXAM....

## What is a pelvic exam?

A pelvic exam is looking at and feeling the size and shape of your private parts on the inside and outside.

These include the vulva (outside), and vagina, uterus, ovaries and fallopian tubes (inside).

## Why do I need one?

The exam helps to make sure that your private parts are healthy. It also helps your health care provider find things (like infections or abnormal Pap tests) that could make you very sick if not treated. Many doctors suggest that you have your first pelvic exam after you first have sex or when you turn 21 years old.

## Will it hurt?

The pelvic exam will not hurt. Many women say it feels like crowding or fullness in the vagina; however, there should be no pain. Sometimes a woman will feel discomfort, especially if she is tense.

## I feel scared to have one. Do other women feel this way?

It is normal to feel uneasy, embarrassed, or even scared.

Many women think that the worst part of the exam is that a stranger is looking at their private area. It may not seem so bad if you remember your doctor is highly trained and has done hundreds or thousands of exams. The exam is not emotional or sexual for the doctor. It is okay to have someone with you, like your mom, a friend, or a nurse.

## Do I have to take off all my clothes?

Most of the time, yes. You will be given a gown or sheet and asked to remove your clothes, including your bra and panties. You can undress in privacy and put on the gown before the doctor comes in for the exam.

## What will it feel like?

You will feel touching with gloved fingers on the outside of your privates. Later during the exam you will feel two fingers in your vagina and the doctor's other hand on your belly with gentle pressing between the two hands. At one

point during the exam, the doctor will insert a tool called a speculum into your vagina. The speculum will usually be warmed to make it more comfortable. The doctor may finish the exam by placing one finger in your bottom and one finger in your vagina. The reason for this is the doctor can feel much higher and deeper in your body to make sure everything is normal.

## What is a speculum and why is it used?

A speculum is a tool to gently spread the walls



The Speculum

of the vagina open so the doctor can see inside.

Speculums (made of metal or plastic) come in different sizes to fit a woman's body.

The plastic ones sometimes make clicking noises when opened. If the speculum causes you pain, tell your doctor right away; he/she may be able to use a smaller speculum.

## If I'm a virgin, do I still need a pelvic exam?

If you are a virgin, it is important to have a pelvic exam if you have not had a period around the same time as other young women your own age, or if you have had problems with bleeding, pain, or discharge. You will still be a virgin after the exam. Women who have used tampons may find the first pelvic exam easier than those who use pads or panty liners.

## What is a Pap test?

A Pap test or Pap smear is a test that helps doctors find changes in the cervix (the opening to the area where babies grow at the end of the vagina). The Pap test includes wiping or scraping a small wooden stick (similar to a popsicle stick) over the cervix. The sample collected with the stick is then looked at under a microscope by laboratory worker. The lab worker is looking for changes in your body tissue that may need follow up. During the Pap test you will feel the swab

being wiped across the cervix; this feels kind of scratchy, but is not painful.

It's important to understand that the Pap test is a screening test only. This means doctors do not base treatments on the Pap test, but use it to decide if more tests are needed. The reason a Pap test is done is to find changes before they can become cancer. If your Pap test isn't normal, don't panic. Many women think a Pap test that isn't normal means they have cancer, but that isn't true. Most things detected by an abnormal Pap test are not serious and are easily treated in the office.

### **How often do I need to get a Pap test?**

How often Pap tests are needed is different for every woman depending on your age and other factors. You should ask your doctor how often you need a Pap test.

### **What position will I be in for the pelvic exam?**

Usually for a pelvic exam, you will lay on your back with your feet resting in foot rests, called stirrups. You will be asked to move your bottom down to the end of the table and let your knees fall wide apart. The reason for this position and

the stirrups is to provide the doctor access to your privates.

### **What can I do to be more comfortable during the exam?**

Most women want to close their legs or squeeze the muscles in their vagina when fingers or a speculum are placed there. While it may be natural to clamp down, tensing the muscles often will make you more uncomfortable. The key to the pelvic exam is to relax.

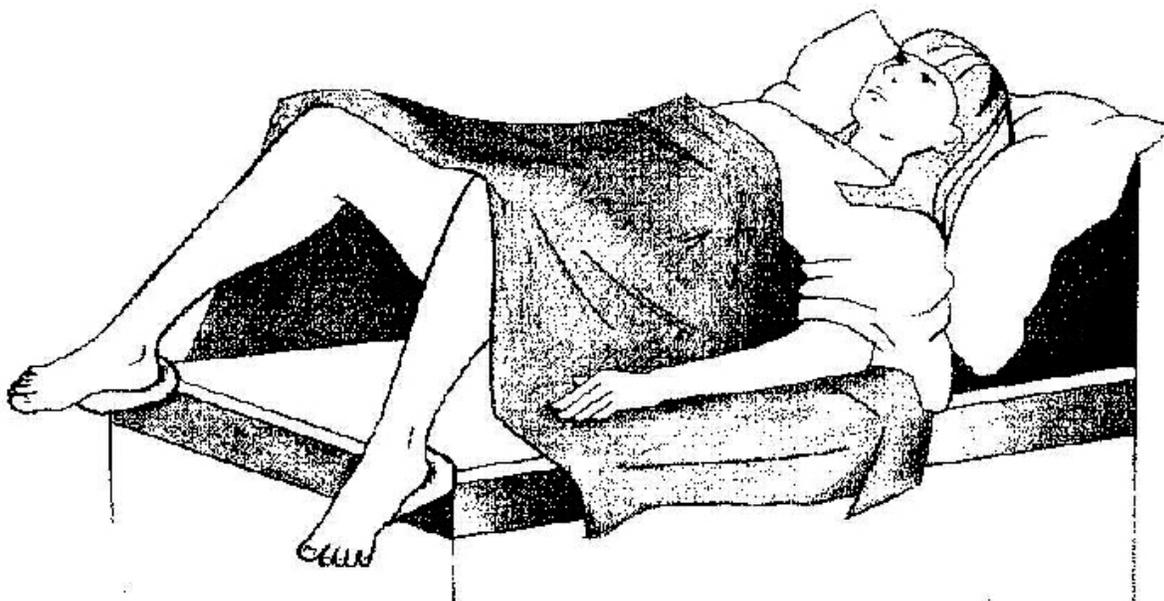
Take slow, deep breaths and try to distract your mind to help you relax.

### **Can I see what is happening?**

Ask your doctor if you can watch the exam. Many doctors are happy to show women their private area with a hand held mirror. Please ask if you're interested.

### **How long will it take?**

Usually the whole exam takes no more than 5 minutes. Even though no one likes to have the exam done, it is important to your health now and in the future. After the first exam almost everyone says it wasn't as bad as they thought it would be. You can be proud of yourself for taking charge of your health.



Adapted with permission from Spokane Regional Health District