
Frequently Asked Questions

What is colposcopy?

Colposcopy is a way of looking at the **cervix**, **vagina**, and **vulva** through a special magnifying device called a **colposcope**. A colposcope can greatly enlarge the normal view. This exam allows an **obstetrician–gynecologist (ob-gyn)** to find problems that cannot be seen by the eye alone.

Why is colposcopy done?

Colposcopy is done when results of **cervical cancer** screening tests show abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix. Colposcopy provides more information about the abnormal cells. Colposcopy may also be done if you have certain types of **human papillomavirus (HPV)** infection.

Colposcopy can be used to further assess other problems, including

- itching, burning, or abnormal skin on the vulva (possible signs of cell changes that can lead to cancer)
- genital warts
- cervicitis (an inflamed cervix)
- benign (not cancer) growths, such as **polyps**
- pain
- bleeding

Sometimes colposcopy may need to be done more than once. It can also be used to check the result of a treatment.

How is the procedure done?

Colposcopy is typically done in your ob-gyn's office.

The procedure is best done when you are not having your period. This gives the ob-gyn a better view of the cervix. For at least 24 hours before the test, you should not

- douche
- use tampons
- use vaginal medications
- have sex

As with a [pelvic exam](#), you lie on your back with your feet raised and placed on foot rests for support. A [speculum](#) is used to hold apart the vaginal walls so that the inside of the vagina and the cervix can be seen. The colposcope is placed just outside the vulva.

A mild solution is applied to your cervix and vagina with a cotton swab or cotton ball. This liquid makes abnormal areas easier to see. You may feel a slight burning.

The ob-gyn looks through the lens of the colposcope. The colposcope enlarges the view and shines a light onto the vulva, vagina, and cervix.

When is a biopsy done during colposcopy?

During colposcopy, your ob-gyn may see abnormal areas. A [biopsy](#) of these areas may be done. During a biopsy, a small piece of tissue is removed from the cervix, vagina, or vulva. You may feel a pinch or cramping while this is done.

Cells may also be taken from the canal of the cervix. A special device is used to collect the cells. This is called endocervical curettage.

It can be helpful to take over-the-counter pain medication before the biopsy. Your ob-gyn can tell you which type of pain medication is best to use.

What should I expect during recovery?

If you have a colposcopy without a biopsy, you should feel fine right away. You can do the things you normally do. You may have a little spotting for a couple of days.

If you have a colposcopy with a biopsy, you may have pain and discomfort for 1 or 2 days. Over-the-counter pain medications can be helpful. You may have some vaginal bleeding and a dark discharge for a few days. The discharge may occur from medication used to help stop bleeding at the biopsy site. You may need to wear a sanitary pad until the discharge stops.

Your ob-gyn may suggest you limit your activity for a brief time. Do not put anything into your vagina for a short time:

- Do not have sex.
- Do not use tampons.
- Do not douche.

When should I call my ob-gyn?

Call your ob-gyn right away if you have any of these problems:

- Heavy vaginal bleeding (using more than one sanitary pad per hour)
- Severe lower abdominal pain
- Fever
- Chills

Glossary

Biopsy: A minor surgical procedure to remove a small piece of tissue. This tissue is examined under a microscope in a laboratory.

Cervical Cancer: A type of cancer that is in the cervix, the opening to the uterus at the top of the vagina.

Cervix: The lower, narrow end of the uterus at the top of the vagina.

Colposcope: A special magnifying instrument used to examine the cervix, vagina, and vulva.

Colposcopy: Viewing of the cervix, vulva, or vagina under magnification with an instrument called a colposcope.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV): The name for a group of related viruses, some of which cause genital warts and some of which are linked to cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, penis, anus, mouth, and throat.

Obstetrician–Gynecologist (Ob-Gyn): A doctor with special training and education in women's health.

Pelvic Exam: A physical examination of a woman's pelvic organs.

Polyps: Abnormal tissue growths that can develop on the inside of an organ.

Speculum: An instrument used to hold open the walls of the vagina.

Vagina: A tube-like structure surrounded by muscles. The vagina leads from the uterus to the outside of the body.

Vulva: The external female genital area.

If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

Don't have an ob-gyn? [Search for doctors near you.](#)

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Last updated: December 2022

Last reviewed: August 2022

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