

and cervix can be seen. You may hear clicking or similar noises as the speculum is placed.

To reduce any discomfort, the clinician may keep the speculum warm, and lightly lubricate the speculum before inserting it. It is normal to feel some pressure or a little discomfort during the exam. If you have any pain, let the clinician know right away.

First, your clinician will examine the outside of the vagina. They will look for signs and symptoms of infection, like soreness, redness, swelling, or sores. Then, they will look for similar signs when looking inside the vagina with the speculum.

Next, the clinician will check internal organs for any unusual swelling or pain. They will place one or two gloved fingers in the vagina with lubricant. At the same time, they will push down on your lower belly from the outside.

The clinician will also use a cotton-tipped swab to collect a sample from the inside of the vagina. The sample is tested to see if you have an infection. Another sample might be taken from the cervix for a Pap smear.

## You have the right to privacy.

During your appointment, you can expect that the pelvic exam will be performed in private.

## You have the right to have someone with you during the exam.

You can have a companion, advocate, partner, friend, or family member with you.<sup>1</sup>

You have the right to **not** have someone in the room with you.

## Your health facility may offer a medical chaperone.

This person is usually a nurse or medical assistant. You may be given a chaperone automatically. If you are not given a chaperone, you can ask for one.

You have the right to file a complaint if you think that your clinician engaged in any misconduct, including sexual misconduct.

For complaints about doctors/physicians, physician assistants, and specialist assistants, contact the New York State Department of Health, Office of Professional Medical Conduct: 1-800-663-6114, M-F, 9am–5pm Eastern Time.

Online complaint form: [www.health.ny.gov/professionals/doctors/conduct/file\\_a\\_complaint.htm](http://www.health.ny.gov/professionals/doctors/conduct/file_a_complaint.htm)

For complaints about nurses, nurse practitioners, midwives, and other licensed professionals, contact the New York State Education Department, Office of Professions: 1-800-442-8106.

Online complaint form: [www.op.nysed.gov/enforcement/discipline-complaint-form](http://www.op.nysed.gov/enforcement/discipline-complaint-form).

Note, the complaint form must be mailed or faxed to specific locations. Instructions are on the fillable form.

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Health care clinicians who perform pelvic exams should provide this document to patients prior to a pelvic examination in accordance with Public Health Law §2504-b.

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# WHAT TO EXPECT AT YOUR PELVIC EXAM

A pelvic exam is a routine part of reproductive health care. During this type of checkup, a health care clinician checks private parts (genitals) and reproductive organs such as the vulva, vagina, cervix, and uterus.

Some people feel nervous before a pelvic exam, especially if they have never had one before. However, a pelvic exam is an important part of taking care of your body. It may be uncomfortable, but it takes only a few minutes.

### Below we explain:

- what a pelvic exam is
- when you should get one
- what happens before and during an exam
- what to do if you have any concerns

<sup>1</sup>FAQ 518: Who will be in the room during a pelvic exam. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, reviewed May 2024. [www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/pelvic-exams](http://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/pelvic-exams).

## Why is a pelvic exam important?

A pelvic exam can help you better understand your body. This checkup is an important part of taking care of your sexual health. It may be offered to:

- look for common diseases that may have no symptoms
- check for cancer
- help diagnose the cause of symptoms such as bleeding, discharge, pain, and other concerns

## When should I get a pelvic exam?

Most people have their first pelvic exam when they are age 21. This is when it is recommended that you start getting screened for cervical cancer. If you are 30 or older, talk to your clinician about when and how often to be screened.

Cervical cancer screening uses a Pap smear to look for cell changes on the cervix. Screening is important because it can help prevent cervical cancer or find it early.

A human papillomavirus, *pronounced pa-puh-low-muh vai-ruhs*, or HPV, test may also be done to look for the virus that can cause changes to the cervix. HPV is a viral infection that is spread through sexual contact. It can cause changes in cells that can lead to genital warts or cancer over time.

Some people may have a pelvic exam if they have other health concerns — a specific complaint or possible injury to the genitals. A pelvic exam is also done as routine care before a long-acting form of birth control is inserted. This birth control method is called an intrauterine, *pronounced in-truh-yoo-tr-uhn device*, or IUD. Talk with your clinician about whether you need to have a pelvic exam.

You have the right to refuse a pelvic exam. Ask your clinician about other testing options.

## What is a pelvic exam?

A pelvic exam is a routine way to check for signs of disease, infection, and anything unusual in the vulva, vagina, cervix, uterus, and other inner (internal) organs. At any age, a person should have an exam if they have symptoms of a sexually transmitted disease (STI), or other unusual symptoms, such as discharge or pain.

A pelvic exam is done by a health care clinician in a medical office, clinic, or hospital. Health care clinicians can include doctors, midwives, nurse practitioners, nurses, or physician assistants.

During a pelvic exam, a “Pap smear” or “Pap test” is often done to check for cervical cancer. During a Pap test, the clinician uses a swab to take a sample of cells from the cervix, the opening to the uterus. The sample will be looked at under a microscope to check for the presence of any abnormal cells. Your clinician will let you know if or when you need a Pap smear.

## What happens before, during, and after a pelvic exam?

### Before the appointment:

You may be told to prepare for the exam a couple of days early. Your clinician may ask you to avoid having vaginal sex, and using any creams, medicines, douches, or suppositories in or around the vagina. These activities can make it harder to find any problems during the exam. They can also make it look like there is a problem when there really isn't.

You can get a pelvic exam when you are bleeding from your period or for other reasons.

### At the appointment:

Let your clinician know about any concerns or problems you may have, such as abnormal bleeding or discharge from the vagina, or

any kind of pain. You can also ask questions about the exam if you feel nervous or have a concern.

You will be given privacy in the exam room and asked to undress and change into a clean gown — or you will be given paper covers or drapes.

A pelvic exam should take only a few minutes. During the exam, your clinician should always wear disposable gloves.

You will be asked to lie on an exam table. The clinician will tell you how to position your body, with your legs bent. You will place your feet in footrests, or stirrups. This position helps the clinician easily examine the inside of the vagina. Spreading the knees far apart relaxes the pelvic muscles, making pelvic exams less uncomfortable.

A metal or plastic tool is used to help see the internal organs. This tool is called a speculum, *pronounced speh-kyuh-luhm*. It is inserted into the vagina and opened just enough so the vagina

