
THE PELVIC EXAM

In a good pelvic exam, the doctor should

- tell you what s/he is doing
- be gentle (it shouldn't hurt)
- let you look at your vulva/vagina/cervix

You will be asked to sit on an examining table and slide your "bum" down towards the end and place your feet in stirrups. This can be uncomfortable and a rather degrading position.

The practitioner will then insert a speculum into your vagina (most doctors use metal ones which can be cold -- they should warm them with warm water first) and open it so that your cervix can be seen through it with a light.

A pelvic exam includes a pap test, vaginal culture and a "bimanual" exam.

1. To do the pap test, the practitioner takes a wooden spatula, places the longer end slightly in the os and rotates it a full 360 degrees, taking a gentle but (hopefully) thorough scraping of cells from the surface of the cervix. These cells are then smoothed on to a glass slide, allowed to dry and then sent to the lab. Lab technicians look at the cells under a microscope to check for any abnormalities. Pap results take 1 - 2 months to come back in B.C.
2. To do a vaginal culture, the practitioner should use a sterile swab to take a sample of vaginal secretions from just inside the os, from the vaginal "pool" (the area where mucous/secretions collect below the cervix) and from the vaginal wall. This sample is placed in a bottle of culture "medium" and sent to the lab where it is cultured and then looked at under a microscope to check for abundance of any organisms normally present in the vagina or the presence of sexually transmitted organisms (gonorrhoea, for example). If the woman has an infection of some kind, according to the culture, she can decide how to treat it. Results take about one week.
3. After these are done, the speculum is removed and the practitioner should do a "bimanual" exam. By inserting two fingers into the vagina and placing them under the cervix and putting the other hand on the woman's abdomen above the uterus, s/he can move the uterus around gently and gently feel the ovaries and tubes. This can be somewhat uncomfortable (particularly if you have tight stomach muscles) but shouldn't hurt. If there is pain or tenderness, it could be a sign that something is wrong (pelvic infection, ovarian cysts, etc.) and the practitioner should discuss it with you and answer your questions.