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[Vaginal Cancer - Diagnosis](#) [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 04/2014

ON THIS PAGE: You will find a list of the common tests, procedures, and scans that doctors can use to find out what's wrong and identify the cause of the problem. To see other pages in this guide, use the menu on the side of your screen.

Doctors use many tests to diagnose cancer and find out if it has spread to another part of the body, called metastasis. Some tests may also determine which treatments may be the most effective. For most types of cancer, a biopsy is the only way to make a definitive diagnosis of cancer. If a biopsy is not possible, the doctor may suggest other tests that will help make a diagnosis. Imaging tests may be used to find out whether the cancer has spread. This list describes options for diagnosing this type of cancer, and not all tests listed will be used for every woman. Your doctor may consider these factors when choosing a diagnostic test:

- Age and medical condition
- Type of cancer suspected
- Signs and symptoms
- Previous test results

In addition to a physical examination, the following tests may be used to diagnose vaginal cancer:

Pelvic examination. The doctor feels the uterus, vagina, ovaries, fallopian tubes, bladder, and rectum to check for any unusual changes.

Pap test [3]. The doctor gently scrapes the outside of the cervix and vagina and takes a sample of cells for testing. During the test, a woman will usually feel some pressure as the doctor takes the sample of the cells, but there is usually no pain.

Colposcopy [4]. The doctor may do a colposcopy to check the vagina and cervix for any abnormalities. A colposcope is a special instrument that magnifies the cells of the cervix and vagina, similar to a microscope. The colposcope gives the doctor a lighted, magnified view of the tissues of the vagina and the cervix. The colposcope is not inserted into the woman's body and the examination is not painful, can be done in the doctor's office, and has no side effects. This examination can be performed on pregnant women.

Biopsy [5]. A biopsy is the removal of a small amount of tissue for examination under a microscope. Other tests can suggest that cancer is present, but only a biopsy can make a definite diagnosis. The sample removed during the biopsy is analyzed by a pathologist. A pathologist is a doctor who specializes in interpreting laboratory tests and evaluating cells, tissues, and organs to diagnose disease. The type of biopsy performed will depend on the location of the tissue being biopsied.

If the biopsy indicates that a woman has vaginal cancer, the doctor will refer her to a gynecologic oncologist, a doctor who specializes in treating this type of cancer. The specialist may suggest imaging tests to see if the cancer has spread beyond the vagina.

X-ray. An x-ray is a way to create a picture of the structures inside of the body using a small amount of radiation.

Endoscopy [4]. This test allows the doctor to see inside the body with a thin, lighted, flexible tube called an endoscope. The person may be sedated as the tube is inserted through the mouth, anus, vagina, urethra, or a small surgical opening. Sedation is giving medication to become more relaxed, calm, or sleepy.

Computed tomography (CT or CAT) scan [6]. A CT scan creates a three-dimensional picture of the inside of the body with an x-ray machine. A computer then combines these images into a detailed, cross-sectional view that shows any abnormalities or tumors. A CT scan can also be used to measure the tumor's size. Sometimes, a special dye called a contrast medium is given before the scan to provide better detail on the image. This dye can be injected into a patient's vein or given as a pill to swallow.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) [7]. An MRI uses magnetic fields, not x-rays, to produce detailed images of the body. A special dye called a contrast medium is given before the scan to create a clearer picture. This dye can be injected into a patient's vein or given as a pill to swallow.

Positron emission tomography (PET) scan [8]. A PET scan is a way to create pictures of organs and tissues inside the body. A small amount of a radioactive sugar substance is injected into the patient's body. This sugar substance is taken up by cells that use the most energy. Because cancer tends to use energy actively, it absorbs more of the radioactive substance. A scanner then detects this substance to produce images of the inside of the body.

After diagnostic tests are done, your doctor will review all of the results with you. If the diagnosis

is cancer, these results also help the doctor describe the cancer; this is called [staging](#) [9].

The next section helps explain the different stages for this type of cancer. Use the menu on the side of your screen to select Stages, or you can select another section, to continue reading this guide.

Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/vaginal-cancer/diagnosis>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24638>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24511>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24406>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24486>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24578>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24648>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/19705>