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What Is Cytopathology?

by Sarah Carpenter

Cytopathology is how clinicians screen and diagnose patients for any infections or diseases they might have. A small amount of bodily tissue or fluid is removed from the body, and a cytopathology test is performed to examine the cells for abnormalities. In this article, we'll take a deeper look at what cytopathology is, learn about the different types of cytopathology tests and what to expect from each.

What Is Cytopathology?

The definition of cytopathology is the study and diagnosis of disease on the cellular level. A small amount of tissue or fluid is removed from the body by a clinician, and it's sent to a laboratory to be examined under a microscope by a pathologist for abnormalities or signs of disease.

What Is Cytopathology Used For?

Your primary care physician uses cytopathology to make a diagnosis about your health or any medical problems you might have. A pathologist, who is also a physician, will then use laboratory tests to determine the presence or absence of disease, aiding preventative care and helping to monitor the health of people experiencing chronic illness.

The Two Types of Cytopathology and What They're Used For

The two types of cytopathology are exfoliative and intervention. The main difference between them lies in how cells from the body are obtained for study by the pathologist. In exfoliative cytopathology, cells are [manually scraped or brushed](#) (exfoliated) from your tissue's surface or shed naturally from the body. In intervention cytopathology, cells are obtained by piercing the skin with a fine needle and drawing fluid out ([fine needle aspiration](#)), therefore intervening with your body to get a sample of cells for testing.

When Are Exfoliative and Intervention Cytopathology Used?

Different circumstances determine when either exfoliative or intervention cytopathology is used. Here are some examples and areas of your body where each method of cell collection might be used:

- **Exfoliative Cytopathology**
 - Gynecological Samples: The most common method includes a pap smear, where cells are [brushed off the cervix](#)
 - Gastrointestinal Tract Samples: Cells are brushed off the lining of your stomach and intestines during an endoscopy procedure

- Skin or Mucus Samples: Cells are scraped off the inside of your nose or mouth
- Respiratory Samples: Spit or mucus can be coughed up and tested
- Urinary Samples: Your urine, or pee, is collected for study
- Discharge or Secretion Samples: Bodily discharge is collected from the eyes, nipples or vagina
- **Intervention Cytopathology**
 - Cysts (fluid-filled lumps) or nodules or masses (solid lumps) under the skin
 - Lymph nodes
 - Pericardial fluid (fluid in the sac around your heart)
 - Pleural fluid (fluid in the space between your lung and the inside of your chest wall)

Types of Cytopathology Tests and When They're Used

Many kinds of cytopathology tests can be used for different areas of the body. These tests are most commonly used to diagnose or screen for cancer as a preventative health measure but are also used to monitor the health of a person with chronic illness. Other uses for these tests include diagnosing infectious diseases, inflammatory conditions, thyroid lesions and diseases in the body cavities.

What To Expect from Cytopathology Tests

Most cytopathology tests are simple and painless; preparing for them isn't necessary. Your health care provider will collect a sample of cells from your body using either the exfoliative or intervention method and then send them to the laboratory so that a pathologist can examine them. If abnormal cells are found, the pathologist will make a diagnosis based on the cells and create a report for your health care provider. The results of your test(s) will then be shared with your provider, who will review them with you to determine any next steps.

Cytopathology and Testing at Yosemite Pathology

Cytopathology can save lives by detecting abnormalities in your cells using a variety of tests. Whether you're receiving routine preventative care or being tested regularly due to a chronic illness, cytopathology enables clinicians to make informed decisions about your care.

Since 1948, [our laboratory](#) has provided superior and comprehensive diagnostics in anatomic pathology in the Western United States. The broad range of specialties practiced by our dedicated pathologists in the cancer field includes those of the [breast, skin, thyroid and gastrointestinal system](#), among others. For more information about our services, [contact us today](#).

Sarah Carpenter is a freelance writer whose portfolio spans the industries of health care, higher education, and entertainment. Find out more at [her website](#).

Sources

Cleveland Clinic — [Cytology](#)

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American Cancer Society — [Types of Cytology Tests Used to Look for Cancer](#)