NEW CANCER TEST FOR WOMEN

A new screening test is twice as sensitive as the Pap smear at detecting precancer of the cervix, according to a recent study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Called the human papillomavirus (HPV) test, it, like the Pap, detects potentially cancerous strains of HPV, the sole cause of cervical cancer. The new test uses machines that scan cells taken from your cervix for the DNA of the cancer-causing strains. As a result, the error rate is low—5.4 percent, compared with 44.6 percent for the Pap smear, in which a lab technician checks your cells through a microscope.

The average reimbursement paid by insurance companies for the HPV test is about $50. It’s recommended for older women, generally over 30: Most sexually active women will contract HPV at some point, but in most cases their immune system fights off the virus within two years, says Marie Savard, M.D., internist and former director of the Center for Women’s Health at the Medical College of Pennsylvania. This is why, if you have a positive test result, your doctor may not prescribe treatment right away. —Mego Lien