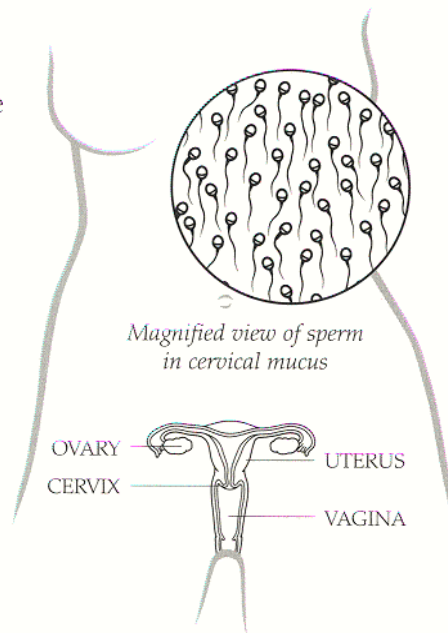


The Postcoital Test (PCT)

The postcoital test evaluates the interaction between the sperm and your cervical mucus at a time near ovulation.

About halfway through your menstrual cycle, you may notice a clear vaginal discharge. This is “fertile” mucus, produced by your cervix near the time you ovulate (release an egg from your ovary). The sperm must penetrate and swim through this mucus, then travel through the reproductive tract to reach the egg. Sometimes there is an incompatibility between the sperm and the cervical mucus, and the sperm become immobile or die. The reason this happens is not clear — the quality of the mucus may not enable the sperm to move well, or infections or antibodies in the mucus may kill the sperm. There may also be a problem with the sperm. Your doctor will examine the quality of your mucus and the interaction of the sperm with your mucus to determine if an incompatibility exists.



How this test is performed

The postcoital test must be performed near the time you ovulate, so you and your doctor will need to estimate when your ovulation will take place. This is often difficult to do, especially if your cycle is irregular. The best way to know when ovulation will occur is to use an ovulation prediction kit that you can buy at the drugstore. The ovulation prediction kit measures the LH (luteinizing hormone) in your urine. A rise in your LH (also called an LH surge) means that you will probably ovulate within the next 24 to 36 hours. When you have an LH surge, you will need to schedule an appointment with your doctor for the next day. Plan to have sexual intercourse any time that day, *before* your appointment. The postcoital test is painless and takes only a few minutes — the procedure is similar to a Pap smear. Your doctor will collect a sample of your cervical mucus and examine it under a microscope to see the quality of the mucus and if the sperm are active or still.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q How soon before the test should we have sexual relations?

A You may have intercourse any time *after* your LH surge. And, it is best to have intercourse within 12 hours before the test. Your doctor or nurse may give you more specific instructions.

Q Is it okay to bathe or shower before having the test?

A You may shower, but do not take a tub bath. Also, do not douche or put anything in your vagina.

Q When will I get the results of the test?

A Your cervical mucus will be examined immediately after it is collected, so your results should be available right away.

Q Will I have to do this test more than once?

A You may have to repeat this test if your results are abnormal or inconclusive. Timing is very important for this test — if it is done too early before ovulation, or too late afterwards, your results may be inconclusive.

Q A couple that I know told me they found this test stressful. Is that true for most couples?

A Most couples feel this way about infertility testing in general, but the postcoital test places a lot of pressure on couples to have sexual relations at a specific time. The added stress often makes it difficult for men to perform and it's not uncommon for couples to have to wait and try again during this cycle or the next one.



POSTCOITAL TEST

The postcoital test (PCT) is a means by which we can determine whether there may be a problem with migration of the sperm cells up the female's reproductive tract after the semen is ejaculated into the vagina. The first step for the sperm cells after ejaculation is to swim into and through the mucus which is found in the cervix. The cervix contains an opening which joins the vagina with the cavity of the uterus. The cervical mucus normally responds to the hormones produced by the ovaries in such a way that when ovulation is occurring, it becomes very thin and easily supports sperm survival. Sometimes these changes do not occur and infertility results. It is estimated that 15 percent of couples with infertility have a problem at the level of the cervix.

When we do a PCT, we are looking to see how many sperm have made their way into the cervical mucus, how well these cells are doing in terms of their vitality and swimming strength, and what the physical properties of the mucus are. In order to do this test correctly, the test has to be done at or around the time of ovulation. This is determined with commercially available ovulation predictor kits.

Approximately one and one-half days before ovulation, the pituitary gland sends a strong hormonal message to the ovaries in order to trigger the changes which lead up to the release of an egg. Several commercially available kits now allow the couple to check urine for evidence of the hormonal signal. Beginning on cycle day number 11 (the first day of flow is defined as day number one), check your urine between 12:00 noon and 2:00 pm every day. On the day before ovulation, the test will be positive. Follow the directions on the ovulation predictor kit to determine when the test is positive. Ideally, the postcoital test should be done the day after the color change.

The test is very simple and painless. Contact our office as soon as you have a positive test. You must call before 4:00 p.m. We will arrange a time for your postcoital test. If you are given a morning appointment, you are to have intercourse after 12:00-12:30 pm the night before. If you are given an afternoon appointment, you are to have intercourse early in morning the day of your appointment. A pelvic exam is performed by the physician or one of the nurses, and the cervical mucus is removed and placed under the microscope. The sperm are observed and counted. The information is available immediately.

If a problem with the PCT is discovered, treatments are available. Frequently, intrauterine inseminations will be employed to bypass the cervix entirely. The decision on what therapy to employ is a joint one between the couple and physician.

The cost of the postcoital test is \$100, and is not covered by insurance. Please be prepared to pay for the test on the day it is performed.

While we attempt to be available 7 days a week, testing can't always be performed on weekends and holidays. Please call the office if you have questions about weekend/holiday testing. In addition, if you schedule a weekend appointment and don't show up, you will be billed a \$50 fee to cover office expenses.