



Improving lives through the prevention and treatment of anogenital & HPV-related diseases

Practice Pearls 7: Tips for Best Practice on Unsatisfactory Cytology

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An unsatisfactory cytology result is reported when there are insufficient cells for the cytopathologist to properly evaluate the specimen. This occurs in approximately 2% of cytologic samples. A number of factors can contribute to this outcome, including atrophy, poor or improper collection technique, obscuring inflammation, poor slide preparation, presence of blood, excessive lubricant in the specimen, and increased thickness of the smear.

When specimen results are reported as unsatisfactory, the 2019 management guidelines recommend repeating age-based screening in 2-4 months (Figure 1). A negative HPV test obtained in conjunction with unsatisfactory cytology should not be considered a valid result. In this scenario, the recommendation is to repeat both the cytology and HPV test in 2-4 months. Colposcopy should be performed if the subsequent cytology result is again unsatisfactory.

Overall, these recommendations are unchanged from the 2012 management guidelines.

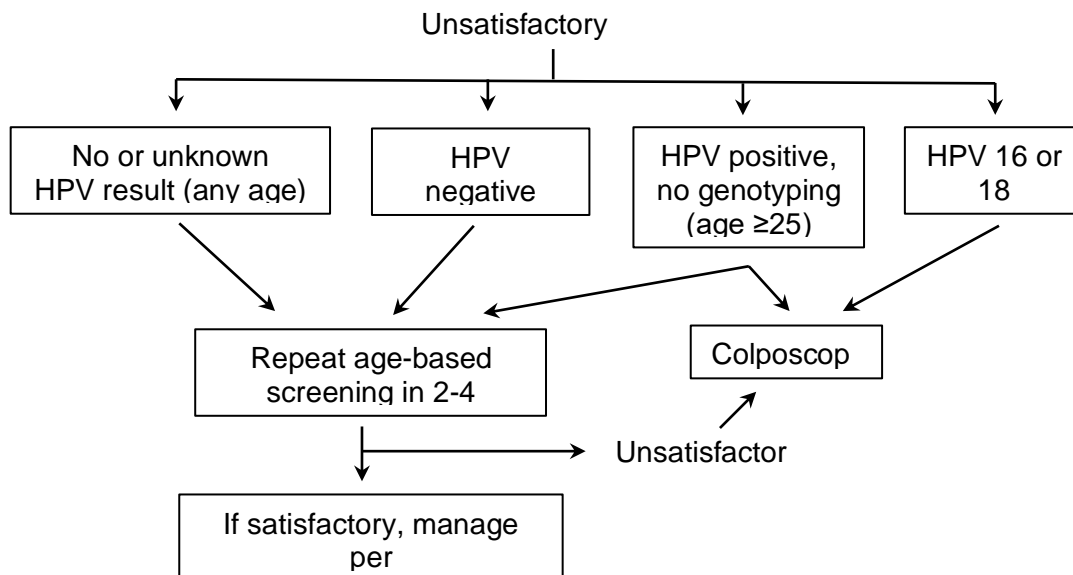


Figure 1. Management of unsatisfactory cytology (adapted from Figure 5 of Perkins et al, 2019 ASCCP Risk-Based Management Consensus Guidelines for Abnormal Cervical Cancer Screening Tests and Cancer Precursors).

This topic will likely become increasingly less relevant with more widespread adoption of primary HPV testing over time.

Standard Abbreviations

HPV - Human Papillomavirus

hrHPV - High-Risk Human Papillomavirus

HSIL - High-Grade Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion

VaIN - Vaginal Intraepithelial Neoplasia

NCCN - National Comprehensive Cancer Network

LSIL - Low-Grade Squamous Intraepithelial Lesion

NILM - Negative for Intraepithelial Lesion or Malignancy

ASC-H - Atypical Squamous Cells, Cannot Rule Out High-Grade Lesion

ASC-US - Atypical Squamous Cells of Undetermined Significance

AGC - Atypical Glandular Cells

AIS - Adenocarcinoma In Situ

LEEP - Loop Electrosurgical Excision Procedure

ECC - Endocervical Curettage

CIN - Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia

SCJ - Squamocolumnar Junction

mRNA - Messenger Ribonucleic Acid

CO₂ - Carbon Dioxide

WHO - World Health Organization