

# Cervical Screening

(previously known as a smear test)

**Screening saves lives**

## Overview

A cervical screening test (previously known as a smear test) is a method of detecting abnormal cells on the cervix. The cervix is the entrance to the womb from the vagina.

Detecting and removing abnormal cervical cells can prevent cervical cancer.

## Testing for abnormal cells

Cervical screening isn't a test for cancer, it's a test to check the health of the cells of the cervix. Most women's test results show that everything is normal, but for around 1 in 20 women the test shows some abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix. Most of these changes won't lead to cervical cancer and the cells may go back to normal on their own. But in some cases, the abnormal cells need to be removed so they can't become cancerous. About 3,000 cases of cervical cancer are diagnosed each year in the UK.

It is possible for sexually active women of all ages to develop cervical cancer, although the condition is most common in women aged 30 to 45. The condition is very rare in women under 25.



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## The cervical screening programme

The aim of the NHS Cervical Screening Programme is to reduce the number of women who develop cervical cancer and reduce the number who die from it. Since the screening programme was introduced in the 1980s, the number of cervical cancer cases has decreased by about 7% each year.

All women who are registered with a GP are invited for cervical screening:

aged 25 to 49 – every 3 years

aged 50 to 64 – every 5 years

over 65 – only women who have recently had abnormal tests

Trans men (individuals who have changed gender from female to male) who still have a cervix and are still registered as female with a GP will also be invited for cervical screening. Trans men who are registered as male will need to let a GP or practice nurse know so they can organise the test. Trans men who have had a total hysterectomy do not need to have cervical screening tests.

Women over 65 who have never been for cervical screening can have the test. Ask a GP or practice nurse for more information.

Being screened regularly means any abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix can be identified at an early stage, and, if necessary, treated to stop cancer developing. Cervical screening isn't 100% accurate and doesn't prevent all cases of cervical cancer, but it's the best way to pick up any abnormal cells that could later turn into cancer.

Screening is a personal choice and you have the right to choose not to attend.

## Booking your test

You'll receive a letter through the post asking you to make an appointment for a cervical screening test. The letter should contain the details of the place you need to contact for the appointment. Screening is usually carried out by a practice nurse at your GP clinic. You can ask to have a female doctor or nurse.

If possible, you should try to book an appointment during the middle of your menstrual cycle (usually 14 days from the start of your last period), as this can ensure a better sample of cells is taken. It's best to make your appointment for when you don't have your period.

If you use a spermicide, a barrier method of contraception, or a lubricant jelly, you shouldn't use these for 24 hours before the test, as the chemicals they contain may affect the test.

## What happens when you go for cervical screening?

The cervical screening test usually takes around five minutes to carry out. You'll be asked to undress from the waist down and lie on a couch. If you're wearing a loose skirt you can usually remain fully dressed and just remove your underwear. The doctor or nurse will gently put an instrument called a speculum into your vagina. This holds the walls of the vagina open so the cervix can be seen. A small soft brush will be used to gently collect some cells from the surface of your cervix.

Some women find the procedure a bit uncomfortable or embarrassing, but for most women it isn't painful. If you find the test painful, tell the doctor or nurse as they may be able to reduce your discomfort. Try to relax as much as possible as being tense makes the test more difficult to carry out. Taking slow, deep breaths might help. You can also bring someone along to the appointment with you if you want support.

If you've had a test previously and you found the procedure painful, you should mention this before your next test. It might be that your cervix is tilted, or 'retroverted', which might make it more difficult for the doctor or nurse to find it. You might be more comfortable if you put your hands under your bottom to raise it while the sample is taken. Ask the clinician's advice about making the procedure easier for you.

Your cell sample will be sent off to a laboratory for analysis and you should receive the result within two weeks.

## HPV testing

Changes in the cells of the cervix are nearly always caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV).

There are more than 100 different types of HPV. Some are high-risk types linked to cervical cancer, and some are low-risk types linked to other conditions, like genital warts. Most cervical cancers are caused by high-risk types HPV-16 and HPV-18.

After successful trials, HPV testing has been added into the NHS Cervical Screening Programme.

## Your results

If a sample taken during the cervical screening test shows low-grade or borderline cell abnormalities, the sample should automatically be tested for HPV. If HPV is found in your sample, you should be referred for a colposcopy (see overleaf for details) for further investigation and, if necessary, treatment.

If no HPV is found, you'll carry on being routinely screened as normal. If your sample shows more significant cell changes, you'll be referred for colposcopy (see below for details of the procedure) without HPV testing.

In some NHS areas, a test for HPV is the first test on the screening sample. This is called primary HPV screening. In these cases, the sample is only checked for abnormal cells if HPV is found.

If HPV isn't found, you'll be offered a screening test again in three to five years (depending on your age).

## Colposcopy

If you are asked to attend for a colposcopy, you will find that the procedure is rather similar to a cervical screening test. Instead of using a brush to take samples from your cervix, a microscope with a light is used to look at your cervix — the microscope does not touch or enter your body. If any abnormalities are seen, a tissue sample (biopsy) will be taken to be sent for examination at a laboratory. Taking a tissue sample is usually painless, but you might have a crampy pain for a few minutes. Sometimes immediate treatment is given rather than waiting for the results of the biopsy.

You can find more information at <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/colposcopy/>

## HPV screening is to be routine

During 2019, primary HPV screening will become the routine way of testing cervical screening samples across the whole of the NHS Cervical Screening Programme.

More information, including a video, is available from <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/cervical-screening/>

You can also search for “smear test” which will reveal other useful websites such as <https://www.jostrust.org.uk/about-cervical-cancer>

**If you would like to have a copy of this leaflet in a different format to make it easier to read, please contact the Practice.**