

## **CERVICAL SCREENING**

A cervical screening test (smear test) is a method of preventing cervical cancer by detecting abnormal cells in the cervix (lower part of the womb).

Cervical screening is not a test for cancer, but it is a test to check the health of the cervix. Most women's test results show that everything is normal. But for one in 20 women, the test will show some changes in the cells of the cervix.

Most of these changes will not lead to cervical cancer and the cells will go back to normal on their own. In some cases, the abnormal cells need to be treated to prevent them becoming a problem later.

Around 900 women die of cervical cancer in England each year. However, many of those who develop it have not been screened regularly. Not going for cervical screening is one of the biggest risk factors for developing cervical cancer



### **The screening programme**

In the UK, cervical cancer is the second most common cancer in women under 35 (after breast cancer). About 2,800 women a year are diagnosed with cervical cancer.

The NHS Cervical Screening Programme aims to reduce the number of women who develop cervical cancer and the number of women who die from the disease.

All women aged between 25 and 64 are invited for cervical screening. Being screened regularly means that any abnormal changes in the cervix can be identified early on and, if necessary, treated to stop cancer developing.

It is estimated that early detection and treatment can prevent up to 75% of cervical cancers from developing - up to 4,500 lives will be saved each year in England by cervical screening.

### **Should all women have the test?**

We offer the test to all women aged between 25 and 64 but cervical cancer is more common if you:

- Smoke
- First had sex at an early age
- Have had several sexual partners or have had a sexual partner who has had several other partners
- Take immunosuppressant drugs (for example, after an organ transplant).

If you have passed the menopause, you still need to be tested to check that your cervix is healthy. Ask your doctor for advice if you:

- Have had a hysterectomy;
- Are over 65;
- Have never had sex with a man or woman; or
- You are not sure whether you still need to be tested.

### **What is the NHS Cervical Screening Programme?**

The programme makes sure that if you are aged between 25 and 64, you will automatically receive an invitation. We will get your name from your doctor's list. This means it is important that your doctor always has your correct name and address.

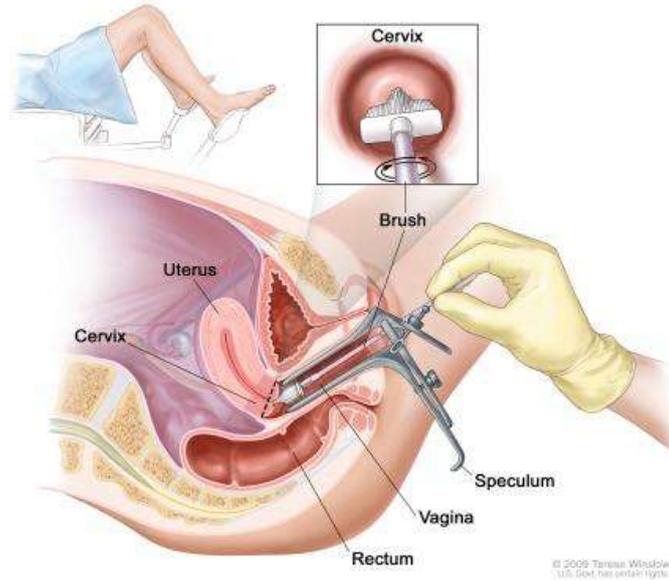
After your first cervical screen, you will receive invitations every three years between the ages of 25 and 49. You will then be invited every five years between the ages of 50 and 64

**Women under the age of 25 are currently not eligible to receive a smear test on the NHS in England. Cervical cancer is very rare in this age group.** If you are under 25 and worried about your cervical health please speak to your GP.

Cervical Screening Wales is part of the national screening programme which is managed through the Welsh Assembly. The screening programme that is offered to people who live in Wales (even if they are registered with a GP in England) is slightly different to that provided for women who live in England. Within the Welsh programme, women will be offered the cervical screening test from the age of 20. It also may take between 4-6 weeks to receive the results of your smear test

### **What happens during the test?**

The doctor or nurse will ask you to undress from the waist down and lie down on a couch. They will then gently put a small instrument, called a speculum, into your vagina to hold it open.



Then, they will wipe a small brush-like device over the cervix to pick up some cells. They will transfer these cells into a small container of liquid, and send it away for the cells to be transferred onto a slide and examined under a microscope.

The test takes just a few minutes.



You cannot be tested during your period so make sure you get an appointment before or after your period is due. The best time is in the middle of your cycle.

When you have the test, the doctor or nurse will tell you how, where and approximately when you will get your results. You should have your results within 14 days of having your smear. Make sure you have received this information before you leave the surgery or clinic.

The cervical smear is not a diagnostic test. It can not be used to identify symptoms or problems that you may be having. *If you have any unusual symptoms, such as bleeding after sex or between periods, you should see your doctor.*

## **Is the test painful?**

Your cervical smear test should not be painful. Some women may find the procedure a little uncomfortable and describe a slight pressure, but this is not painful and doesn't last long.

Some women may feel embarrassed by having the test. This is a natural feeling, but be reassured that your doctor or nurse is very used to carrying out the tests, they will not be embarrassed so you needn't be either. You can ask for a female doctor or nurse or a chaperone (someone to stay with) if you prefer. If you have any specific beliefs or cultural customs, talk them through with your doctor or nurse. We want every woman to feel safe and comfortable.

## **How reliable is cervical screening?**

Early detection and treatment can prevent around 75% of cancers developing but, like other screening tests, it is not perfect.

It may not always detect early cell changes that may lead to cancer. Abnormal cells on your slide may not be recognised because:

- Sometimes they do not look much different from normal cells
- There may be very few abnormal cells on the slide

About one in 20 tests have to be taken again because:

- You may have an infection which needs treating before a clear slide can be made
- The cervical cells on your slide may have been hidden by blood or mucus
- There may not have been enough cervical cells on your slide to give an accurate assessment
- Your sample may not have been properly prepared
- The slide may have been broken.

## **What does it mean if I am called back?**

Only very rarely does it mean that you have cancer. It might simply mean that your sample did not show up clearly and that we need to take another test. This is called an 'unsatisfactory result'.

On the other hand, your result could identify some small changes in the cells of the cervix. If abnormal changes (known as dyskaryosis) are detected, you will have what

is called an 'abnormal result'. This is not cancer. However, sometimes cancer will be found when an abnormal test is investigated further.

### **Can anything be done about abnormal changes?**

Yes. Your doctor or nurse will explain what needs to be done. They may simply ask you to come back for more cervical screening tests, because the abnormal cells may return to normal by themselves. However, they may ask you to go to hospital for a closer examination which is called 'colposcopy'.

Treatment, if it is needed, is a minor procedure and is usually done in an outpatient clinic. This means you will not have to stay overnight.

### **Can cervical screening prevent cancer?**

Regular cervical screening is the best way to detect changes to the cervix early. Early detection and treatment can prevent cancer developing in around 75% of cases.

### **Changes to the cervical screening programme**

There are some big changes about to take place in the cervical screening programme. The smear test will not change but, in addition to having your smear test carried out, samples of cells will be tested for HPV.

HPV (humanpapiloma virus) is a virus which has been shown to be the cause of most cases of cervical cancer. HPV is a common virus and most women will come into contact with the virus throughout their lifetime. Mostly the virus causes no problems, most women do not know they have the virus and the virus will clear by itself. However, if the virus does not clear quickly then it may put a woman at greater risk of developing cervical cancer. There are many different types of HPV, some are classed as 'high risk' and some are 'low risk' for causing cancer.

By testing for HPV, we can identify if any changes in cells are likely to be normal cell changes or a higher risk of being abnormal changes that may or maynot develop into cancer. Ultimately, most women will need less cervical smear tests, as fewer women will be recalled for repeat tests, and it provides an extra test to help prevent and identify cervical cancer.

The HPV testing will be rolled out from 2012.

## Summary

To help you decide whether or not to come for cervical screening, the main benefits and difficulties of cervical screening are explained below.

- Cervical screening reduces the risk of developing cervical cancer.
- Due to cervical screening, cervical cancer is now an uncommon disease in this country.
- Cervical cancer rates have halved since the 1980s, largely due to most women regularly having cervical screening.
- In one in 20 tests, the cells cannot be seen properly under the microscope and the test must be taken again.
- The test can show minor abnormalities in cervical cells which would have cleared up on their own, and women would never have known about them if they had not been for screening. It is not yet clear which minor abnormalities will develop into cancer and which will not. Many women worry when a minor abnormality is found.
- Cervical screening does not pick up every abnormality of the cervix.
- Regular cervical screening can prevent around 75% of cervical cancers developing, but it does not prevent every case.
- Research suggests that up to 4,500 lives will be saved each year in England by cervical screening.



## More Information

If you would like more information about your cervical screening test or cervical cancer, have a look at the following links:

<http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervical/>

<http://www.jostrust.org.uk/>

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Cervical-screening-test/Pages/Introduction.aspx>