

Patient information

Human papillomavirus and cervical screening

Why does the NHS offer cervical screening?

The aim of the NHS Cervical Screening Programme is to reduce the amount of people with cervical cancer and deaths from the disease. Since its introduction, the screening programme has helped halve the number of cervical cancer cases and it is estimated that it saves thousands of lives each year in England.

The NHS offers cervical screening to all women and people with a cervix aged 25 to 49 years every three years, and to all women and people with a cervix aged 50 to 64 every 5 years. This is because most cervical cancers develop in those aged 25 to 64.

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer happens when cells in the cervix grow in an uncontrolled way and build up to form a lump (also called a tumour). As the tumour grows, cells can eventually spread to other parts of the body and become life-threatening.

Your cervix is the lowest part of your uterus (or womb) and is found at the top of your vagina.

What causes cervical cancer?

Nearly all cervical cancers are caused by cancer causing strains of a virus called **high risk human papillomavirus** (or hrHPV for short).

The HPV virus is very common and most people will come into contact with it at some point in their life. It is a virus that is passed on through skin-to-skin contact, particularly through any type of sexual activity.

There are many different types of HPV but only some of them can lead to cancer.

The types of HPV which cause cervical cancer are taken up by the cervix without causing any symptoms at all. In most cases, your immune system makes the virus inactive without you ever knowing you had it. Sometimes, high risk HPV strains can cause cells in your cervix to become abnormal.

Usually, your body can get rid of the abnormal cells and your cervix returns to normal. But sometimes this does not happen, and the abnormal cells can go on to develop into cancer.

Cervical screening and HPV testing

The first test in the NHS Cervical Screening Programme is to test for high-risk strains of HPV and this is called **primary HPV screening**. From very large national studies, we know that this initial test is much better at 'picking out the people' who have the most chance of having a cervical cell abnormality including those with a cancer.

Primary HPV screening

Once your cervical screening sample is sent to the laboratory, it will first be tested for hrHPV. If hrHPV is found, your sample will also be looked at for abnormal cells. If you don't have hrHPV, then it is extremely unlikely that you will have any abnormal cervical cells.

Testing for HPV first should benefit you because:

- More abnormal cervical cells will be picked up
- If you don't have HPV you can be reassured that you are at extremely low risk of developing cervical cancer (although we cannot say 'no risk')
- The information we are gathering during the introduction of HPV primary screening will help us improve the screening programme.

Screening results

There are three main types of result from **primary HPV screening**:

1. **No HPV found (hrHPV negative)**

If no HPV is found, then no further tests will be done. If you don't have HPV, it is highly unlikely that you will have any abnormal cervical cells. Even if you did, it would be extremely unlikely that they would cause a problem. You will simply be called back for screening again in 3-5 years' time (depending on your age).

2. **HPV found (HPV positive) but no abnormal cervical cells found**

If HPV is found, the sample will also be tested for abnormal cervical cells. If none are found, your result will say you have HPV but no abnormal cells.

You will be asked to come for screening again in 12 months' time. This is so we can check that your immune system has cleared the HPV (this happens in most cases). If it hasn't cleared, you may be at greater risk of developing abnormal cells. If the HPV infection continues you will be referred for colposcopy.

3. **HPV found (HPV positive) and abnormal cervical cells found**

There are several grades of abnormal cells. Your result letter will explain what your results mean.

If you have HPV and any grade of abnormal cervical cells, you will be referred for colposcopy.

Colposcopy examinations use a special microscope, and a detailed examination of the cervix is carried out.

This is exactly the same as having a cervical smear carried out, but a very bright light is used (the microscope). If you are invited for colposcopy, you will be sent an appointment letter to attend this clinic.

It is also possible to have an 'inadequate' result. This may be due to a technical problem, such as if the laboratory cannot get an HPV test result from your sample or cannot see if abnormal cells are present or not.

Can HPV be treated?

No, there isn't a treatment to get rid of the virus. For most people, their immune system will clear the HPV virus, and this can take around two years. Those over 35 years and those with any conditions that affect the immune system will take much longer to clear HPV and return to negative smear results. If you smoke, you may find it much more difficult to clear HPV as smoking damages the cells within the cervix which clear viruses.

Minor changes within cervical cells (low grade dyskaryosis) will be cleared by the immune system and until cells return to normal, cervical smears are carried out more regularly with additional colposcopic examinations.

Other changes within cervical cells (moderate and severe dyskaryosis) can be treated. Early treatment means that cervical cancer can be prevented in the vast majority of cases.

Where can I get more information?

If you would like more information about HPV or HPV primary screening and would like to speak to a nurse, please telephone 01284 713601, an answer phone service is available.

Further information

Cervical screening information leaflets are available at:

www.gov.uk/government/collections/cervical-screening-information-leaflets

If you would like any information regarding access to the West Suffolk Hospital and its facilities please visit the website for AccessAble (the new name for DisabledGo)

<https://www.accessable.co.uk/organisations/west-suffolk-nhs-foundation-trust>



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