

Factsheet: Cervical Screening

What is cervical screening? Cervical screening is the process of taking samples from your cervix which are then examined to detect abnormalities that might become cancerous in the future. The sample of cells is placed in liquid so that it can be analysed in the laboratory. This is called liquid based cytology (LBC) and the cells are examined with a microscope. Screening can detect pre-cancerous/abnormal cells and the detection and successful treatment of these cells can often prevent the occurrence of cancer. Changes in these cells are generally caused by certain types of human papillomavirus (HPV).* Testing for the HPV virus itself can also be done on the same LBC sample that is examined under the microscope, although this is not done routinely on all samples at the moment.

Regular cervical screening provides a high degree of protection against developing cervical cancer and is offered free on the NHS. Cervical cancer is largely preventable if you attend your screening invitation. Each year screening saves 5000 women in the UK from developing cervical cancer. Not going for cervical screening is one of the biggest risk factors for developing cervical cancer.

Remember, cervical screening is **NOT** a test for cancer. Instead it is a screening test to detect abnormalities that can be treated to prevent cancer developing.

Who is eligible for screening?

To be invited for cervical screening you need to be registered with a GP, who needs to have your current address on file. The NHS call and re-call system invites all women who are eligible for screening and registered with a GP. This system also keeps track of any follow-up investigation, and, if all is well, re-calls you for screening at the appropriate time for you – either 3 to 5 years (see the chart to the right for eligibility in your country).

Country	Eligibility
England	Women aged 25 to 49 invited every 3 years Women aged 50 to 64 invited every 5 years
Northern Ireland	Women aged 25 to 49 invited every 3 years Women aged 50 to 64 invited every 5 years
Scotland	Women aged 20 to 60 invited every 3 years
Wales	Women aged 20 to 64 invited every 3 years

Table 1. Cervical screening eligibility in the UK

What happens when I have a screening sample taken?

Having your cervical screening sample taken should only take a matter of minutes. In the UK, GP's and practice nurses take the majority of cervical screening samples. You can bring a relative or friend with you if you need support and you can request a female nurse or GP to take the sample.

* Contact us on publications@jostrust.org.uk if you would like our factsheet on HPV

Before the procedure starts the doctor or nurse should explain what is going to happen and answer any questions or concerns you may have.

You will be asked to undress from the waist down and to lie on an examination bed either on your back with your legs bent up and apart or sometimes lying on your side with your legs bent. A sheet will be placed over the lower half of your body. Your doctor or nurse will then insert an instrument called a speculum into your vagina. The speculum gently opens your vagina allowing the doctor or nurse to see the cervix.

A special brush is used to gently take cells from the surface of the cervix. The sampled cells are immersed in a vial of preservative fluid and looked at under the microscope in the laboratory. This process is called liquid based cytology (LBC).

Results of screening

Last year in the UK (2009-10), around 7 in every 100 women who went for cervical screening were given an abnormal result. This means that the laboratory has found some cell changes that may need further investigation. If left untreated abnormal cells can sometimes change into cancer of the cervix. A screening report will usually describe these changes as cervical dyskaryosis or dysplasia.

The different results of cervical screening are listed below:

- Borderline result indicates a slight abnormality
- Mild dyskaryosis indicates mild changes
- Moderate dyskaryosis indicates moderate changes
- Severe dyskaryosis indicates more severe changes.

Depending on where you live you may also be offered an HPV test. HPV testing can help distinguish between women who have a higher risk of developing abnormal cells and thus also cervical cancer, from those who have a very low risk. It also reduces the number of unnecessary colposcopies and repeat cervical screenings among women with borderline screening results. For more information on HPV testing please see the Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust website (www.jostrust.org.uk).

Abnormal screening result

If you have received an abnormal cervical screening result or your practice nurse has visually noticed changes in your cervix, you will be invited to attend a colposcopy. Colposcopy is simply a more detailed look at the cervix. Instead of looking at the cervix with the naked eye they will use a special microscope to see the changes at high magnification. Don't worry about the sound of this! The microscope stays outside you. All that goes inside is the speculum, in the same way as when your screening sample was taken.

Some clinics may be equipped with video equipment so that you can watch the examination if you wish. The examination may take a little longer than a standard cervical screening but the doctor or nurse performing the colposcopy will talk to you as you during the examination and tell you what is happening.

You may require treatment for the abnormal cells but this depends how advanced the changes to the cells are. Many women have only mild changes and these will often get better on their own without treatment. If this is the case, you will be examined regularly instead of having treatment.

Your colposcopist will advise you on the specific treatment you will require during your colposcopy appointment.

Remember: the purpose of cervical screening is to find changes in the cervix that can be treated **BEFORE** they become cancer.

This factsheet has been produced by Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust. We're the UK's only charity dedicated to women, their families and friends affected by cervical abnormalities and cervical cancer.

If you would like more information about cervical cancer, HPV and cervical screening please go to: www.jostrust.org.uk

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