

# HPV and HPV primary screening in cervical screening: the basics



This resource is a refresher for primary care staff, including sample takers and non-clinical staff. Other healthcare professionals may also find it useful.

## 1. About HPV

HPV is a really common virus that is passed on through skin-to-skin contact. 8 in 10 people will get it at some point. It infects the skin and any moist membrane (mucosa), such as:

- the cervix
- the lining of the mouth and throat
- the vagina, vulva and anus

Most types of HPV are low risk. These types cause no problems, or can cause minor conditions such as genital warts or warts on the hands and feet.

About 13 HPV types are linked to some cancers. HPV does not have symptoms.

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## 2. Who gets HPV

Anyone who has ever had any kind of sexual contact is at risk of getting HPV. All genders, all sexual orientations, all ages – HPV does not discriminate.

Genital HPV can be passed on through vaginal, anal and oral sex. It is rarer, but HPV can also be passed on through touching in the genital area and sharing sex toys.

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## 3. How HPV affects the body

There is no treatment for HPV. The immune system will usually get rid of HPV before it causes any problems. 9 in 10 people get rid of HPV within 2 years.

In some cases it can cause the cells to change. If these are not monitored or treated they can turn into cervical cancer.

There are treatments for conditions caused by HPV, including genital warts, cervical cell changes and cancer.

## 4. Testing for HPV

Cervical screening in Scotland now tests for HPV, known as HPV primary screening. This change was made in March 2020.

The test for the patient is exactly the same – it is just how the sample is tested that has changed. They need to know that their sample is now tested for high-risk types of HPV, and if this is found, the same sample will be tested for cervical cell changes.

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## 5. Benefits of testing for HPV first

- It helps us identify who is at higher risk of developing cervical cancer, so we can monitor them more closely
- It's a more accurate test, which is better at detecting cell changes
- It detects cell changes earlier than cytology
- It could be done with a self-sample kit in the future

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## 6. Change to screening invitations

Because HPV testing is a more sensitive test, women and people with a cervix in Scotland are now invited for cervical screening every 5 years regardless of their age. This is because it is unlikely cell changes would develop into cervical cancer without high-risk HPV.

Scotland is the first UK country to make this change, which has been recommended by the UK National Screening Committee.

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## 7. The rest of the UK

	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
HPV primary screening	Yes	Yes	Yes	No (date to be confirmed)

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## 8. Signposting

Further questions? Call our Helpline, or **read more**.