

NHS Cervical Screening Programme

Cervical screening and human papillomavirus (HPV) testing

This leaflet tells you about HPV testing. This is a test carried out on the sample of cells we take during cervical screening. It makes no difference to what happens at your screening appointment.

Looking for HPV as the first test on screening samples is currently being introduced into the NHS Cervical Screening Programme. You may hear it being called 'HPV primary screening'. It helps us to more quickly identify who may need treatment, and who can simply be called back for screening in 3 or 5 years' time.

For information about going for screening, and about HPV, please read our leaflet 'NHS Cervical Screening: helping you decide' at:

www.gov.uk/phe/cervical-screening-leaflet

More information is at www.nhs.uk/cervical

Why have I been sent this leaflet?

You live in an area where HPV primary screening is being used in the NHS Cervical Screening Programme. This isn't happening everywhere in England yet.

What is HPV?

HPV is a very common virus. Most women get it at some point in their lives. HPV can be easily passed on during sexual activity between partners. Some types of HPV can cause abnormal cells in the cervix.

HPV primary screening

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

Testing for HPV first should benefit women because:

- more abnormal cervical cells will be picked up
- women without HPV can be reassured that they 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

Are all women offered HPV primary screening?

Not yet. In places where it isn't used yet, screening samples will either:

- not be HPV tested
- be HPV tested only after the sample has been checked for abnormal cells (cytology)

Screening results

There are 3 main types of result from HPV primary screening.

No HPV found (HPV 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 or 5 years' time (depending on your age).

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 cervical cells. If the HPV infection continues you will be referred for colposcopy.

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 is a closer examination of the cervix. It is carried out in a similar way to cervical screening. If you are invited for colposcopy, you

will be sent our leaflet 'NHS cervical screening: the colposcopy examination'.

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

If you have an inadequate result, you may be asked to have cervical screening again in 3 months' time. We wait so that there are enough cells again to get a sample from.

Can HPV be treated?

No, there isn't a treatment to get rid of the virus. For most women, their immune system will get rid of HPV – like getting rid of a common cold. But we can treat abnormal cervical cells, especially if they are found early on. Early treatment means that cervical cancer can be prevented.

Where can I get more information?

If you would like more information about HPV primary screening, or anything else in this leaflet, you can:

- talk to the nurse at your GP practice
- read our leaflets at www.gov.uk/government/collections/cervical-screening-information-leaflets

Find out how Public Health England and the NHS use and protect your screening information at:

www.gov.uk/phe/screening-data

To opt out of screening, see:

www.gov.uk/phe/screening-opt-out

Leaflet reference: CSP06 © Crown copyright 2016

This version: May 2019 (PN1355152)

Review date: February 2021

PHE gateway number: 2016181



Re-use of Crown copyright material (excluding logos) is allowed under the terms of the Open Government Licence. Visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/ for terms and conditions.

