

NHS Cervical Screening Programme

HPV testing

Information for women

What is the NHS Cervical Screening Programme?

The Cervical Screening Programme aims to reduce the number of women who develop invasive cervical cancer and the number of women who die from it. It does this by regularly screening women between the ages of 25 and 64, so that conditions that might otherwise develop into invasive cancer can be identified and treated. The introduction of HPV testing will help it to do this even more effectively.

What is HPV?

HPV stands for Human Papilloma Virus. It is a very common infection and most women get it at some time in their life. In most cases it clears up by itself without the need for treatment.

There are many types of HPV. Most are harmless but some can cause abnormalities in the cervix and are known as 'high-risk' HPV types. These abnormalities often clear up without treatment when the virus clears. But in some women the virus persists, placing them at greater risk of developing cervical abnormalities (CIN) which may need treatment.

How do people get HPV?

HPV is a very common infection among people who have been sexually active at some time in their life. It is easily transmitted during sex between men and women and between partners of the same sex. The virus shows no symptoms, so it is possible that:

- someone may have had the infection for many years without knowing about it
- a partner may have been infected years earlier and, again, be unaware of it.

Why might I be tested for HPV?

HPV testing in women with borderline or mild dyskaryosis

If a woman's screening result shows mild abnormalities (called borderline or mild dyskaryosis) an HPV test will be carried out on her sample. Women with borderline or mild dyskaryosis have only a 15–20% chance of having an abnormality significant enough to need treatment.

The HPV test is important because the presence or absence of HPV indicates which women might need treatment. If HPV is found in her sample the woman will be invited to go for colposcopy. Colposcopy involves looking closely at the cervix to see whether any treatment is needed. If it is, she will normally be seen in an Outpatients Clinic, which means that there is no need to stay in hospital overnight.

HPV testing in women who have received treatment for CIN

If colposcopy reveals CIN and the woman is treated for it, she will be screened once again around six months after her treatment. If the result is normal, borderline or mild the sample will be tested for HPV. If HPV is not found she will not need to be screened for another three years.

If HPV is found, or if the screening result shows moderate or worse dyskaryosis, the woman will be invited for colposcopy again. She will then be treated or (if treatment is not needed) monitored in line with the national guidelines covering women who have had colposcopy.

How is the HPV test done?

The test is done using the sample of cells taken during the screening test, so there is no need to be screened again.

Where can I find more information?

If you would like more information about HPV testing, or about anything else mentioned in this factsheet, talk to your practice nurse or visit the NHS Cancer Screening Programmes website at www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk.