

# Cervical screening: it's best to take the test



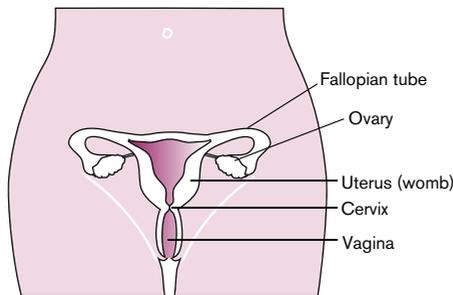
**Cervical  
Screening**

This leaflet gives information about cervical screening in Northern Ireland. It will help you to understand why it is important to be screened.



## What is cervical screening?

Cervical screening aims to prevent cervical cancer from developing. It's often called a 'smear test'. The test checks the cells from your cervix (the lower part of the womb). It's designed to pick up any changes to the cells in your cervix so that they can be monitored or treated. Without treatment the changes can sometimes develop into cervical cancer.



## How common is cervical cancer?

- **Each year around 83 women in Northern Ireland are diagnosed with cervical cancer.**
- **Each year around 21 women in Northern Ireland die from cervical cancer.**
- **Early detection and treatment can prevent 8 out of 10 cases of this cancer.**



## What causes changes to cells in your cervix?

Most changes are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). There are over 100 types of HPV. Most types are harmless but some 'high risk' types are known to cause cancer. HPV is a very common infection and most women get it at some time in their life. There are no symptoms and it usually clears up without the need for treatment. However, in some women the virus persists. This can damage the cells of the cervix and may need treatment.



## How do people get HPV?

HPV is easily spread by skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. Condoms will not completely protect you from HPV infection. As there are no symptoms, it is possible to have the infection for many years without knowing about it.



## Can the test detect all changes?

No. The test will pick up most changes to your cervix but can't find them all. Changes can also happen between tests so it is important to go for a screening test every time you're invited and act on any symptoms.



## Who is offered screening?

In Northern Ireland, screening is offered to all women aged 25–64. This is the age group where screening is of most benefit. You will be automatically invited every three years if aged 25–49, and every five years if aged 50–64. If you haven't received your invitation, or if you have any cause for concern, you should talk to your GP.



## Do I need to go for screening if...

### *...I've never had sex?*

**Yes**

Your risk of developing cervical cancer is very low as there's less risk of you having HPV. However, the virus can sometimes be passed on through sexual activity other than full intercourse. If you're unsure whether you need the test, you can talk to your doctor or nurse.

### *...I haven't had sex for a long time?*

**Yes**

Changes in your cervix can take many years to develop. It is important that you are regularly screened if you've ever been sexually active.

### *...I'm lesbian/bisexual?*

**Yes**

As with other sexually transmitted infections, HPV spreads by intimate skin-to-skin contact. Lesbian and bisexual women can get infected with the virus and develop cervical cancer.

### *...I've had the HPV vaccine?*

**Yes**

The vaccine, which is now routinely offered to pupils aged 12–13 years (Year 9), protects against only two of the 'high risk' types of HPV. It doesn't protect against HPV infections you may have picked up before immunisation, or those caused by the other 'high risk' types of HPV.

### *...I'm pregnant?*

**Yes**

Screening can still be carried out when you're pregnant. If you're invited for screening and you're pregnant, ask your doctor or nurse for advice.

### *...I'm past the menopause?*

**Yes**

Women in all age groups can get cervical cancer. Some women may find the test more uncomfortable after the menopause, but ask your doctor or nurse for advice on ways to reduce this.



## Where do I go for screening?

Screening can be done by a nurse or doctor at your GP practice or family planning clinic. If you have any additional needs please mention this when you book your appointment, and you can always bring a friend or relative if this helps. It's best not to have the test during your period.



## What will happen at the appointment?

You will be asked to undress from the waist down and to lie on your back on a couch with your legs drawn up and your knees apart. Your lower body will be covered with a sheet. (You may prefer to wear a loose skirt that can be kept on during the test.)

An instrument called a speculum will be inserted by the nurse or doctor into your vagina to hold it open. A small soft brush will then be wiped over the cervix to pick up a sample of cells. This sample is sent to a laboratory to be examined under a microscope.

Screening will only take about 10 minutes. The test should not be painful but some women may find it uncomfortable. You may experience some spotting afterwards but this is normal.



## Is there anything I should do before screening?

Do not use lubricating or spermicidal jelly for the 24 hours before you are screened. This can make it difficult to get a clear result and the test may need to be repeated.



## When and how do I get my result?

Your result should be available within four weeks. The person taking your test will tell you how and where to get your result. Make sure you have been given this information before you leave the GP practice or clinic.



## What will the result tell me?

9 out of 10 women's results show no changes to cells in their cervix.

For the 1 in 10 women who have changes, treatment will usually be for changes to the cells before they turn into cancer.



Your results may show:

### No changes to your cells

- In most cases, your result will show 'no changes at this time'.
- You'll be invited for cervical screening again in three or five years' time (see box on page 3).

### Not enough cells to test

- Sometimes there are not enough cells in the sample to examine.
- This is not unusual and occurs in about 3 in every 100 tests.
- You will be asked to return for a repeat test in three months.

## Minor changes to your cells

- If your result shows minor changes, your sample will also be tested for HPV.
- If HPV is found, you will be referred for a more detailed examination of the cervix called a colposcopy (see below).
- If HPV is not found, your risk of significant cervical disease is very low and you will not need any further follow-up at this time.
- You will be invited for cervical screening again in three or five years' time (see box on page 3).

## Changes which require further investigation

- A result showing changes is common but doesn't mean you have cervical cancer.
- You will be referred to a colposcopy clinic for examination to assess whether or not treatment is required.





## What happens at the colposcopy clinic?

Colposcopy is a simple examination of the cervix using a colposcope (a type of magnifying glass). It is carried out at your local hospital. It lets the doctor or specialist nurse look more closely at the changes on your cervix to decide if you need treatment. The examination is similar to the screening test. Detailed information about colposcopy will be sent to you with your appointment for the colposcopy clinic.

Colposcopy may be done safely during pregnancy, although treatment may be delayed until after your baby has been delivered.

Colposcopy will not affect your ability to get pregnant in the future.



## What does treatment involve?

Any treatment you may require is usually simple and is carried out under a local anaesthetic as an outpatient at your local hospital. Your specialist will explain what to expect.

Treatment involves removing the area of affected cells from the cervix and the process is nearly always successful. The choice of treatment and any risks involved will be discussed with you in detail at the clinic. In some cases you may be asked to come back to the clinic for further colposcopy examinations.



## How can I reduce my risk of developing cervical cancer?

The best way to reduce your risk of cervical cancer is to be screened regularly. You can help prevent the spread of HPV by practicing safer sex and there's also a link between cervical cancer and smoking.



## What if I notice anything unusual before I'm due screening again?

You should report any symptoms such as unusual discharge or bleeding to your doctor as soon as possible. This includes bleeding after sex, between periods or after the menopause. Do not wait until your next screening appointment is due.





## Where did you obtain my contact details?

Your details were obtained from your GP. It is important that your GP always has your correct name and address to make sure you receive your invitation for cervical screening.



## What happens to my sample and information?

The laboratory will make a slide from your sample and keep this for 10 years. This is so we can compare your results and make sure you get any treatment you need.

The Northern Ireland Cervical Screening Programme regularly reviews screening records to monitor and improve the quality of the programme and the expertise of specialist staff. Staff working for the programme may see and review your records. Any information relating to you will remain strictly confidential.

We may review your previous screening results if you are diagnosed with cervical cancer. You will be able to see the results of this review if you wish.

If you need more information on how your records are kept and used, the contact details for the screening programme can be found at the website below.

For further information, or this leaflet in another language or format, visit:  
**[www.cancerscreening.hscni.net](http://www.cancerscreening.hscni.net)**





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