Temporary changes to the Cervical Screening Programme: frequently asked questions

These FAQs are designed to explain the temporary changes to the laboratory process as part of the Cervical Screening Programme (introduced March 2023) and to help you understand what they mean for you.

What are the temporary changes to the Cervical Screening Programme?

Due to a backlog in the testing and reporting of cervical screening samples, the Public Health Agency (PHA) has introduced temporary changes in order to ensure that higher risk samples are assessed more quickly. All cervical samples will first be tested for Human papillomavirus (HPV). Following this, they will be examined under a microscope (cytology) to look for any cell changes. This is sometimes referred to as co-testing.

If the sample tests negative for HPV the chances of a patient developing cervical cancer are very low. By undertaking HPV testing on samples, it will be possible to identify all HPV positive samples and allow the laboratory to prioritise these for cytology screening.

Why is there a backlog on cervical screening tests?

A reporting backlog has developed due to the lack of staffing capacity to screen samples under a microscope (cytology). This type of screening relies on qualified and experienced scientific staff. There is a shortage of people with these skills available and that has limited the amount of this screening that can be done.

What is Human papillomavirus (HPV) and where can I find out more about it?

HPV is a common virus that infects the skin and any moist membrane (mucosa). Nearly all cervical cancers are caused by an infection with certain high-risk types of HPV. Further information on HPV can be found here: **www.nidirect.gov.uk/conditions/human-papillomavirus-hpv**

Is co-testing a safe way to check samples?

Yes. Testing for HPV first allows us to make sure those at higher risk will get their results more quickly so that they can access further investigations or treatment.

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Why are both the HPV test and the cytology test being undertaken on all samples?

Due to the lack of capacity to screen samples under the microscope (cytology screening) a reporting backlog has developed. By undertaking HPV testing on these samples, it is possible to identify all HPV positive samples and allow the laboratory to prioritise these for cytology screening. HPV infection is the cause of nearly all cases of cervical cancer, so testing for HPV is a very safe and effective form of screening. For now, we also have to continue to do cytology screening in order to validate the laboratory result across all of the IT systems that support the operation of the screening programme. In the future, the Northern Ireland Cervical Screening Programme will be introducing Primary HPV testing (see below), which is already used in the rest of the UK.

Why wasn't my last sample tested for HPV?

Up until March 2023, the cervical screening programme in Northern Ireland used screening by cytology (examination under the microscope) as the main test. HPV testing was only undertaken where 'low grade type cell changes' were present. Therefore, most samples would not have been ordinarily tested for HPV. This was called HPV triage and allowed the laboratory to determine the appropriate management required.

I've had the HPV vaccine, could my sample still test positive for HPV?

The HPV vaccine is effective at protecting against some types of HPV, reducing cervical cell changes (abnormal cells), and reducing some cancers including cervical cancer. It is still possible that your cervical sample could test positive for HPV since the vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV.

Will anything change in how the cervical sample (sometimes called cervical smear) is taken?

No. There will be no change in how the cervical sample is taken.

When will I get my results?

We will send your result to your doctor when it has been reported (that is when both the cytology result and the HPV result are available). This can take on average up to 12 weeks.

Is there any impact on screening intervals?

Under the temporary arrangements, there will be no change to your screening interval. However, if your sample tests positive for HPV but has no cell changes when examined under the microscope, you will be invited to make an appointment for screening again in 12 months. If a person continues to test positive for HPV on three consecutive screening appointments and they do not have any cell changes, they will be referred to their local hospital for a further investigation called colposcopy. Colposcopy is a simple examination of the cervix using a colposcope (a type of magnifying glass).

Is there any impact on how a patient receives an invite for screening?

No. There are no changes to how a patient receives an invite for screening.

How long will the temporary measures last?

The contingency measures will be in place until the Cervical Screening Programme introduces Primary HPV testing.

What is Primary HPV testing?

Primary HPV testing is the system already in use in the rest of the UK. Under Primary HPV testing, all samples are tested for HPV, and only those which test positive go on to be examined under the microscope (cytology).

How do the temporary co-testing arrangements in Northern Ireland differ from Primary HPV testing?

The temporary arrangements in Northern Ireland are not the same as Primary HPV testing. The main difference is that, under the temporary arrangements, all samples will undergo both HPV testing as well as being examined under the microscope (cytology). Whereas in Primary HPV testing, samples will only be examined under the microscope if they first test positive for HPV.

Will Primary HPV testing be introduced to the Cervical Screening Programme in Northern Ireland?

A definitive date for introducing Primary HPV testing as part of the Cervical Screening Programme in Northern Ireland has not yet been set. However, the PHA is leading on an implementation process for this. This is a significant change process and, before it is introduced, we need to be sure all the required preparations have been made.

Additional information provided by Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust.

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