Guidance Note
HPV TESTING IN COLPOSCOPY CLINICS
Information for Smear Tamers

HPV is a valuable development in cervical screening. Based on current evidence and expert opinion, the National Cancer Screening Service implemented HPV testing at colposcopy clinics.

- HPV testing is used as an adjunct to cytology in the follow up of women who have been treated for Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia (CIN).
- The aim is to identify women who are at low risk of recurrence and who may be discharged for routine recall rather than annual surveillance.
- Women attending for their post treatment follow up visit at CervicalCheck colposcopy services are offered a test for high risk HPV DNA in addition to a cytology test (smear test).
- The test is performed on the cytology sample taken at the 6 months and 18 months follow up visits, in the colposcopy clinic.
- Women will receive their results and management recommendations from the colposcopy clinic.
- The expectation is that if HPV and cytology are negative, the woman can be discharged from colposcopy to routine recall in primary care.

The following questions and answers may be helpful in responding to a woman’s queries around HPV testing.

What is HPV?
HPV is a DNA virus that infects skin or mucosal cells. There are more than 100 known HPV genotypes, at least 13 of which cause cancers. These are known as oncogenic or high risk genotypes.

Oncogenic HPV types cause cancers of the cervix, anogenital cancers and some cancers of the head and neck. The two most common of these (genotypes 16 and 18) cause approximately 70% of all cervical cancers. HPV Types 6 and 11 cause genital warts, a common benign condition which does not require increased cervical screening.

How is HPV transmitted?
The principle mode of transmission of HPV viruses is through sexual contact (epithelium to epithelium) and so most sexually active women are infected with these viruses at some time.

Infection can persist without symptoms, for many years and it is not possible to know when the infection occurred. In addition, some HPV infections can be reactivated following many years.

How common is HPV infection?
HPV is so common that estimates of exposure of up to 80% of the reproductive age population are likely to be accurate. In the vast majority of cases there are no symptoms and the infection resolves spontaneously, usually within eighteen months.

What is the immune response to HPV?
Only 50–60% of women develop serum antibodies after natural infection. The degree of protection and duration of immunity after natural infection are not known.

Re-infections with the same genotype are thought to occur. HPV infection persists longer in immunosuppressed individuals. Cigarette smoking is known to reduce the immune response to HPV infection.

Can HPV infection be treated?
At present there is no effective treatment for HPV infection but the immune system clears most infections.
**Why use HPV testing following colposcopy treatment?**
While it is known that treatment for CIN reduces the risk of invasive cancer by over 90 per cent, treated women still have five times the risk of invasive cancer compared to women who have had normal tests.

Persistent infection with high risk HPV virus types following treatment has been proven to be associated with an increased risk of recurrent high grade CIN and these women require increased surveillance.

Traditionally the special follow up of women post treatment involved annual cytology screening for 10 years before they could return to routine recall.

The use of HPV testing following treatment is designed to avoid unnecessary testing for women at low risk of recurrence and improve the detection of those women who require repeat treatment.

**How is the test done?**
HPV testing is performed on the cytology sample taken in colposcopy. After the cytology slides have been prepared the residual material is used to test for high-risk HPV.

**Can I order a HPV test?**
No, it is not possible to order a HPV test in the primary care setting through CervicalCheck at this time.

**How will HPV testing affect women?**
The HPV test may cause anxiety in women. The benefit of HPV testing, which allows post treatment women who are high-risk HPV negative to return to routine re-call should be highlighted.

**What messages should I pass on when counselling a woman about HPV prevalence, transmission and risk factors?**
- HPV is very common. Most people who have been sexually active have had HPV
- HPV is spread through close skin on skin contact and can be spread through non penetrative sexual activity
- HPV infection usually causes no symptoms and most people never know they are infected
- It is not possible to know from whom the HPV originated
- In most cases the body clears HPV infection on its own
- Stopping smoking will help to boost the immune system to clear HPV infection

**Evidence based papers and further reading**

Castellsagué X. (2008) Natural history and epidemiology of HPV infection and cervical cancer. Gynecol Oncol. 2008 Sep;110(3 Suppl 2): Unit of Infections and Cancer, Institut Català d’Oncologia, IDIBELL, CIBER-ESP. S4-7xcastellsague@iconcologia.net


