Information sheet on cervical screening

What is a cervical screening test?

A cervical screening test checks the health of your cervix. The cervix is the opening to your womb from your vagina. Cervical screening is one of the best ways to protect yourself from cervical cancer.

It's not a test for cancer. It's a test that can help **prevent** cancer from developing.

It's one of the best ways to protect yourself from cervical cancer so do not delay having a cervical screening test every time it's due.

What is HPV cervical screening?

This is a **new** way of cervical screening. It is called HPV cervical screening and was introduced in Ireland in 2020. This type of cervical screening has already been introduced in Australia, the Netherlands, England and Wales. Your cervical screening sample is first checked for human papillomavirus (HPV) – a virus that can cause cervical cancer.

If HPV is found, the same test sample is checked to see if you have any abnormal (pre-cancerous) cell changes in your cervix.

This way of screening:

- is a better way of cervical screening
- prevents more cancers
- means some people will have fewer tests

If you have had a smear test before, having a cervical screening test will feel the same.

How is a HPV cervical screening test done?

The screening test usually takes about 5 minutes.

1. You will be asked to undress from the waist down and lie on a couch.
2. You can lie on your side or on your back, whichever is more comfortable for you.
3. The doctor or nurse will gently put an instrument called a speculum into your vagina. This holds the walls of the vagina open, so they can see your cervix.
4. A small, soft brush will be used to gently collect a sample of cells from the cervix.

Some people find the procedure uncomfortable or embarrassing, but for most it's not painful. If you find the test painful, tell the doctor or nurse as they may be able to reduce your discomfort.

What are the benefits of cervical screening?

Regular HPV cervical screening:

- saves lives
- can find HPV before it causes abnormal cells in the cervix
- can find abnormal cell changes before symptoms develop
- can find abnormal cell changes when they are easier to treat

Finding HPV and abnormal cells early is the best way to prevent cervical cancer developing.

This is why having regular screening tests is important.

What are the limitations of cervical screening?

The main limitations of cervical screening are:

- cervical screening will not prevent all cases of cervical cancer
- some people will still develop cervical cancer despite regular screening
- some abnormal cell changes may be missed
- screening will not find every abnormal cell change
- sometimes test results are not accurate

What happens to my sample?

Your sample will go to a quality-assured laboratory (lab). In the lab your sample will be tested to see if you have a HPV infection. If you have an active HPV infection, two experts will examine your sample for cell changes. If they find any changes, you will need a follow-up test called a colposcopy. A colposcopy is a more detailed look at your cervix.

Why are some abnormal cell changes missed?

Your sample will be checked for HPV first. If HPV is found, it will also be checked for abnormal cells.

But not everyone who develops cervical cancer will have HPV found at screening.

A negative HPV test – one where no HPV was found – also does not mean you won't get the infection in the future.

Abnormal cell changes will sometimes be missed because:

- sometimes abnormal cells can look similar to normal cells
- there may be very few abnormal cells in the sample
- the person reading your sample may miss the abnormal cells (this happens occasionally, no matter how experienced they are)

No test in any screening programme will find every person who has abnormal cervical cells.

Cervical cancer takes many years to develop. In most cases, it takes 10 to 15 years for cells to go from normal to abnormal to cancer.

This is why you should always go for your cervical screening test when it is due.

An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

Plain English
Approved by NALA

CervicalCheck
AN CLÁR NÁISIÚNTA SCAGTHÁSTÁLA CEIRBHEACS
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME

CS/PUB/PM-34 Rev-1

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How will I find out about my test results?

Your results will be sent to you by post, usually within 4 weeks of the test. They will also be sent to your GP (doctor) or clinic.

What do my test results mean?

There are four possible results.

1. HPV not found

Your results show you do not have a HPV infection at this time. You will have your next cervical screening test in 3 or 5 years depending on your age.

2. HPV found and no abnormal cell changes found

Your results show you have a HPV infection **but** no abnormal cell changes were seen. You should have a repeat test in 12 months. This will give your body time to clear the HPV infection.

3. HPV found and abnormal cell changes found

Your results show you have a HPV infection and abnormal cell changes in your cervix. You need a follow-up test called a colposcopy – a more detailed look at your cervix. It is similar to having cervical screening.

4. Inadequate sample

This means that the lab could not process your screening test sample. You will be asked to repeat your cervical screening in three months' time.

Giving your consent

Each time you have a cervical screening test we will ask you to give your consent by signing a cervical screening form before the test. If you cannot sign the form, you will be asked to give your consent either verbally or by making a mark on the form in front of a doctor or nurse.

This is to confirm that you:

- have been told about cervical screening and its benefits and limitations
- understand this information
- have checked that your name, address and other details are correct (this helps us confirm we have your current address to communicate with you)
- allow us to receive, hold and exchange your personal information and screening history with those who deliver the HPV cervical screening programme

Remember: Only you can give your consent to be part of our programme. You have to consent before you have your screening test. You can withdraw your consent at any time by contacting us on Freephone **1800 45 45 55** or emailing **info@cervicalcheck.ie**

This means we will not contact you about the cervical screening programme in the future.

How do we use your personal information?

CervicalCheck takes and securely stores your personal information (name, address, phone number, date of birth, PPSN, surname at birth and mother's maiden name) and cervical screening history. Your cervical screening history relates to your participation in CervicalCheck.

It can include HPV cervical screening results, colposcopy attendances, treatments and biopsy (test sample) results.

We will use your information to contact you when your next screening test is due or when your results are available. We also exchange your information with the other health services that deliver the programme. This includes the doctor or nurse who takes your screening test, the laboratory, colposcopy clinics and the National Cancer Registry Ireland. This is to maintain and improve the quality of the service.

We may use your screening test sample in teaching,

in reviews and audits and to check the quality and effectiveness of the programme. We may also use your information to invite you to take part in research.

It is your choice to take part in screening or not. We will never use your name in any reports, when teaching or in reviews. We will keep your personal information safe, secure and confidential in line with current data protection regulations.

You will have full and open access to your personal information held by CervicalCheck upon request. It is important that you let CervicalCheck know if your details change. To find out how to access your records, see **hse.ie/gdpr/data-requests/**

For further information see the HSE Privacy Notice – Patients and Service Users at **hse.ie/gdpr/**

Communicating with you

We will communicate with you in an open, honest, timely and transparent manner if:

- something goes wrong with your care
- you experience harm as a result of your care
- we think that harm may have occurred

This means that we will keep you fully informed of the facts and details about your participation in the cervical screening programme.

When we have your results, we will send them to you with further information about what they mean. You can also find more information on **hse.ie/cervicalcheck**