What is a colposcopy?
A colposcopy involves a doctor or nurse looking at the cervix with an instrument called a colposcope. During the examination, solutions may be applied to the cervix to help identify any changes to the cells. A colposcopy can be done safely during pregnancy.

Before the colposcopy, the doctor or nurse should explain:
- the colposcopy examination;
- the possible treatments for abnormal cell changes; and
- any risks linked to the treatments.

What exactly happens in the clinic?
First, the doctor or colposcopy nurse will ask you about:
- your periods;
- what type of contraception you use;
- your previous smear history;
- any operations or illnesses you have had in the past; and
- other relevant questions about your health.

They will then ask you to undress from the waist downwards and lie on the examination couch.

The nurse will help you to position yourself on a special type of couch that has padded supports on which to rest your legs.

When you are lying comfortably, the doctor or nurse will gently insert a speculum into your vagina, just as when you had your smear taken, so they can look at the cervix through the colposcope. The colposcope does not touch you or go inside you; it just magnifies the area so that any abnormal areas can be seen more clearly. The doctor or nurse usually takes a repeat smear test before they apply solutions to the cervix that help to identify any abnormality.

If the doctor or nurse sees any abnormal area they may take a small sample of tissue – a biopsy – from the surface of your cervix. You may feel a slight pinching sensation. Alternatively, the doctor may remove a patch of abnormal surface cells on the cervix under local anaesthetic using a very fine heated wire loop.

What is a cervical biopsy?
A biopsy involves removing a sample of tissue from the cervix for examination under a microscope. The biopsy allows for a sample of cells to be tested so they can be assessed more accurately.

How long does a colposcopy take?
The colposcopy examination lasts about 10 minutes. If you get treatment at the same time, it may take a little longer.

Do I need anyone with me?
You may wish to have your partner or a friend or relative with you. A nurse will be there to provide support and help with any questions you may ask.

If you have young children, you should try and arrange for someone to look after them rather than bring them to the clinic.

Can I go straight back to work or college?
After the colposcopy examination you will be able to carry on as normal (this includes going back to work or college and driving). However, if you have had any treatment, you should take things easy for the rest of the day.

Why do I need a colposcopy?
You have been asked to have a colposcopy examination, perhaps because your cervical smear test showed signs of changes in the cells on your cervix (the neck of the womb).

These may be pre-cancerous cell changes, which means they give early warning that cervical cancer might develop if the cells are left untreated. The colposcopy examination allows the doctor or nurse to decide if you need treatment.

For some women, the altered cells on the cervix return to normal by themselves. Other women may need treatment to the cervix; this can usually be carried out in the colposcopy clinic.

Cervical screening saves lives
When is it safe to have sexual intercourse again?
If you had treatment during your colposcopy, you may need to avoid intercourse for up to six weeks to allow the cervix to heal fully.

The doctor or nurse will advise you personally. They will also give you information about what to expect in terms of vaginal discharge after treatment.

Can I eat and drink before my colposcopy?
You can eat and drink as you would normally before your colposcopy. If you don't normally eat breakfast and have a morning appointment, we would advise you to try to have at least a slice of toast.

What if my period is due?
It is best to arrange your appointment for when you do not expect to have your period. If your periods are irregular and you have your period on the day of the colposcopy, you should contact the clinic and arrange a new appointment.

Are there any follow-up visits after treatment?
Yes, you will need to return for a follow-up visit for the doctor or nurse to check how the treatment went. These follow-up checks are very important, as some women may require a second treatment. The doctor or nurse will give follow-up advice at your colposcopy appointment and will advise you about how often you need smear tests.