

Remember

- Most HPV infections clear up on their own.
- HPV can be present for many years without symptoms, so it may be impossible to know how long it has been there.
- Most women with HPV do not develop cervical cancer.
- Having regular smear tests means any changes in the cells of the cervix are found as early as possible.

How to contact CervicalCheck

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HPV and cervical screening

What is HPV?

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is a group of viruses that are extremely common worldwide. There are more than 100 different types of HPV. Each type has a different reference number. Most people have HPV at some time in their lives. It can be present for many years with no symptoms. Like other viral infections (such as a cold), most HPV infections clear up on their own. Some types of HPV can cause changes to develop in the cells of the cervix. However, it is important to note that most women who have HPV do not develop cervical cancer. Other types of HPV can cause problems such as genital warts.

How is HPV spread?

HPV is usually spread by skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. If you have ever engaged in sexual activity, you were probably exposed to HPV. It may be impossible to know how long HPV has been present as it can have no symptoms.

HPV testing in cervical screening

A smear test looks for changes in the cells of the cervix. Most smear test results are normal with no changes found in the cells. If a smear test does show changes, they can be low grade or high grade.

Low grade changes are common and most clear on their own. If low grade changes are found, your smear test sample is also tested for HPV in the laboratory.

If the HPV test result is negative, the low grade changes are not a cause for concern. You will have your next smear test in three or five years, depending on your age. This is known as routine screening. CervicalCheck will write to you to let you know when your next test is due.

If your smear test shows HPV or high grade changes, these changes are less likely to clear up on their own and a more detailed examination of your cervix is needed. This is called a colposcopy. A colposcopy is free of charge and is carried out in a hospital outpatient setting. The doctor or nurse who took your smear test will request a colposcopy appointment for you.

Getting the result

Your smear test result will be available from the doctor or nurse who took your test. If your smear test sample was tested for HPV, the result states if HPV was found. CervicalCheck will send you a letter when your smear test result is available. This is usually within four weeks of having your smear test.

Can HPV be prevented?

HPV is very common and easily passed on and so it is difficult to prevent the spread of HPV. Smoking makes it harder for the body to clear HPV so if you smoke, stop. Condoms may lower your chances of getting HPV but HPV can infect areas that are not covered by a condom so they might not fully protect you.

The HPV vaccine given to schoolgirls can protect against the most common types of HPV that cause changes to the cells of the cervix. For more information on the vaccine, visit www.HPV.ie.

Women who have had the vaccine still need to have regular smear tests as it does not protect against all types of HPV infection. Having regular smear tests means any changes in the cells of the cervix are found as early as possible. The earlier changes are found, the easier they are to treat.