

NHS cervical screening

Helping you decide



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It is your choice whether to have a cervical screening test or not. This leaflet aims to help you decide.

Why does the NHS offer cervical screening?

NHS cervical screening helps prevent cervical cancer. It saves as many as 5,000 lives from cervical cancer each year in the UK.

Why have I been invited for cervical screening?

The NHS offers cervical screening to all women aged 25 to 49 every 3 years and to all women aged 50 to 64 every 5 years. This is because most cervical cancers develop in women aged 25 to 64.

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer happens when cells in the cervix grow in an uncontrolled way and build up to form a lump (also called a tumour). As the tumour grows, cells can eventually spread to other parts of the body and become life-threatening.

Your cervix is the lowest part of your uterus (or womb), and it is found at the top of your vagina.

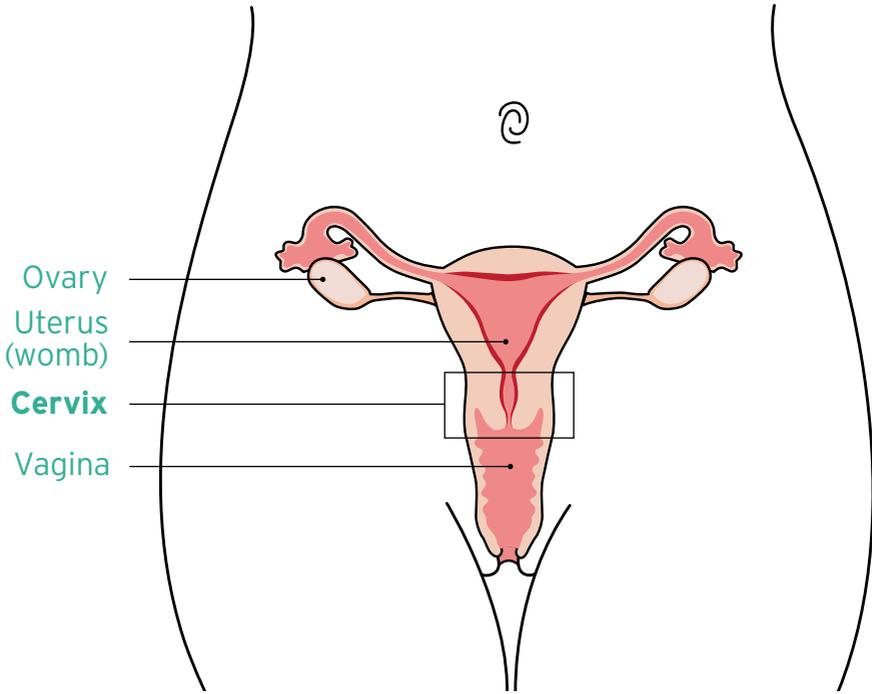
What causes cervical cancer?

Nearly all cervical cancers are caused by a virus called human papillomavirus (or HPV for short).

HPV is a very common virus - most people will be infected with it at some point in their life. It can be passed on through any type of sexual activity with a man or woman. There are many different types of HPV, but only some of them can lead to cancer.

The types of HPV which cause cervical cancer can infect your cervix without causing any symptoms at all. In most cases, your immune system can get rid of the virus without you ever knowing you had it. But sometimes, HPV infections can cause cells in your cervix to become abnormal.

Usually, your body can get rid of the abnormal cells and your cervix returns to normal. But sometimes this doesn't happen, and the abnormal cells can go on to develop into cancer.



What is cervical screening?

Cervical screening (which used to be called the 'smear test') involves taking a small sample of cells from the surface of your cervix. The sample is sent to a laboratory and checked under a microscope to see if there are any abnormal cells. Abnormal cells are not cancer, but they could develop into cancer if they are left untreated.

Depending on the result of your test, your sample may be tested for the types of human papillomavirus (HPV) that can cause cervical cancer.

As a next step you may be offered another test (called a colposcopy) to look at your cervix more closely. If the person carrying out the colposcopy finds abnormal cells, they will suggest that you have the cells removed, usually during another colposcopy. This is how screening can prevent cervical cancer.

What will happen if I choose to have screening?

Before your appointment:

Cervical screening is usually carried out by a female nurse or doctor. If you want to make sure a woman carries out your test, you can ask for this when you make your appointment.

Your appointment should be on a day when you are not having a period. If you don't have periods, you can be screened at any time.

Wearing a loose-fitting skirt (rather than trousers or a tight skirt) might make it easier to get ready for the test. Please don't use any vaginal medications, lubricant or creams in the 2 days before you have your test because they can affect the sample your nurse or doctor takes.

Please talk to your nurse or doctor if you are pregnant, if you have had a hysterectomy, or if there is any reason why you think it would be difficult for you to have a cervical screening test. They will be able to answer any questions or concerns you may have, and will make the right arrangements for you.

At your appointment:

The nurse or doctor will ask you to undress from your waist down and lie on a bed with your knees bent and apart.

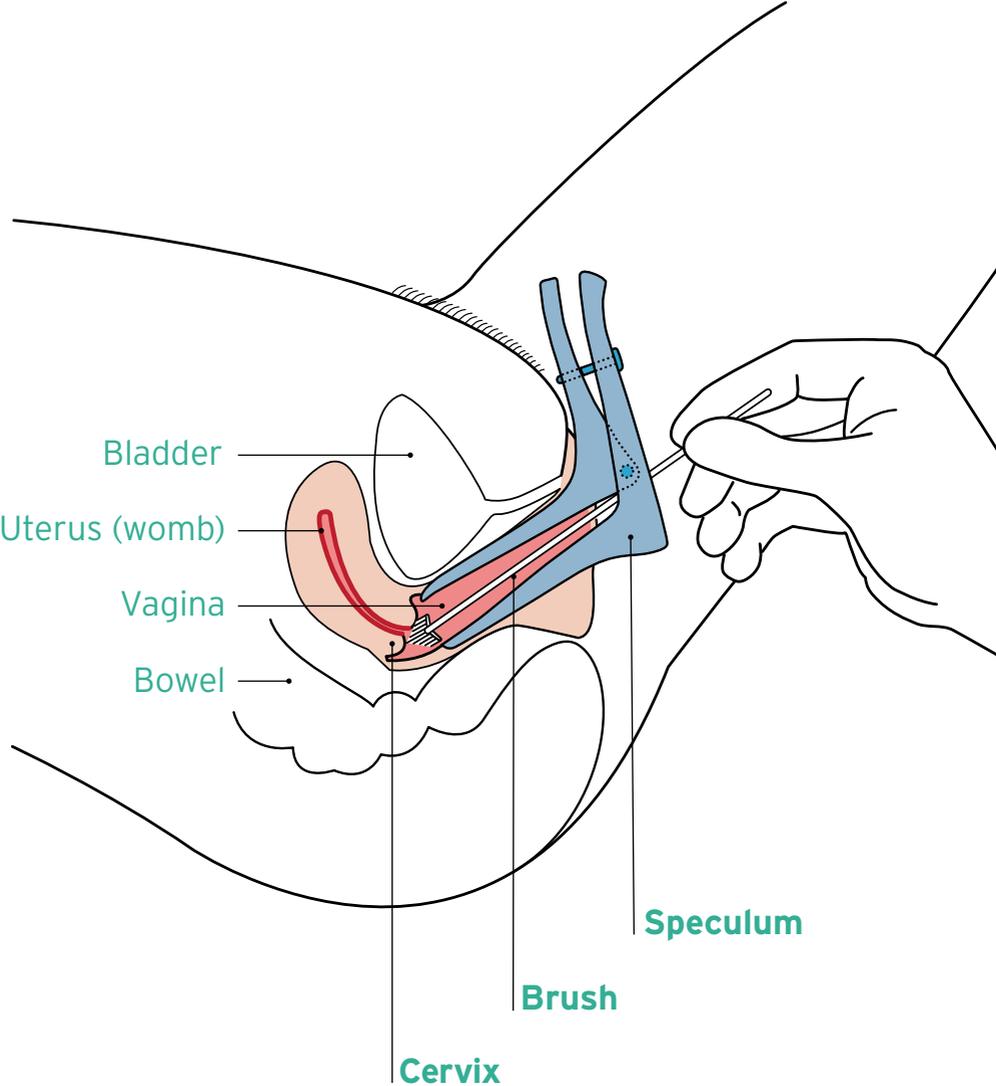
A device called a speculum will be put into your vagina and then used to open it gently. This allows the nurse or doctor to see your cervix.

They then use a small brush to take a sample from the surface of your cervix. The actual test takes only a minute or two. The whole appointment usually takes about 10 minutes.

What does having cervical screening feel like?

You might feel some discomfort, but this should go away quickly. If it feels painful, tell the nurse or doctor and they will try to make it more comfortable for you.

Having a cervical screening test



Cervical screening results

You should receive a letter telling you your results within 2 weeks of your test.

Most women will receive a normal result

Out of 100 women who have cervical screening, about 94 will have a normal result. If you have a normal result, you have a very low risk of developing cervical cancer before your next screening test.

Some women will have abnormal cells in their sample

Out of 100 women who have cervical screening, about 6 will have abnormal cells in their sample. Abnormal cells are not cancer, but sometimes they can develop into cancer if they are left untreated.

Slightly abnormal cells

Most women with abnormal cells will have slightly abnormal cells only. There are two types of slightly abnormal cells, which are known as borderline changes and low-grade dyskaryosis.

If you have slightly abnormal cells, your sample will be tested for the human papillomavirus (HPV) types that can cause cervical cancer.

If you do not have an HPV infection, you have a low risk of developing cervical cancer before your next screening test. So you will be invited back for screening again in 3 or 5 years depending on your age, as usual.

If you have an HPV infection, you will be offered another test (called a colposcopy) to check your cervix more closely.

Very abnormal cells

A few women will have very abnormal cells in their sample. This is called high-grade dyskaryosis.

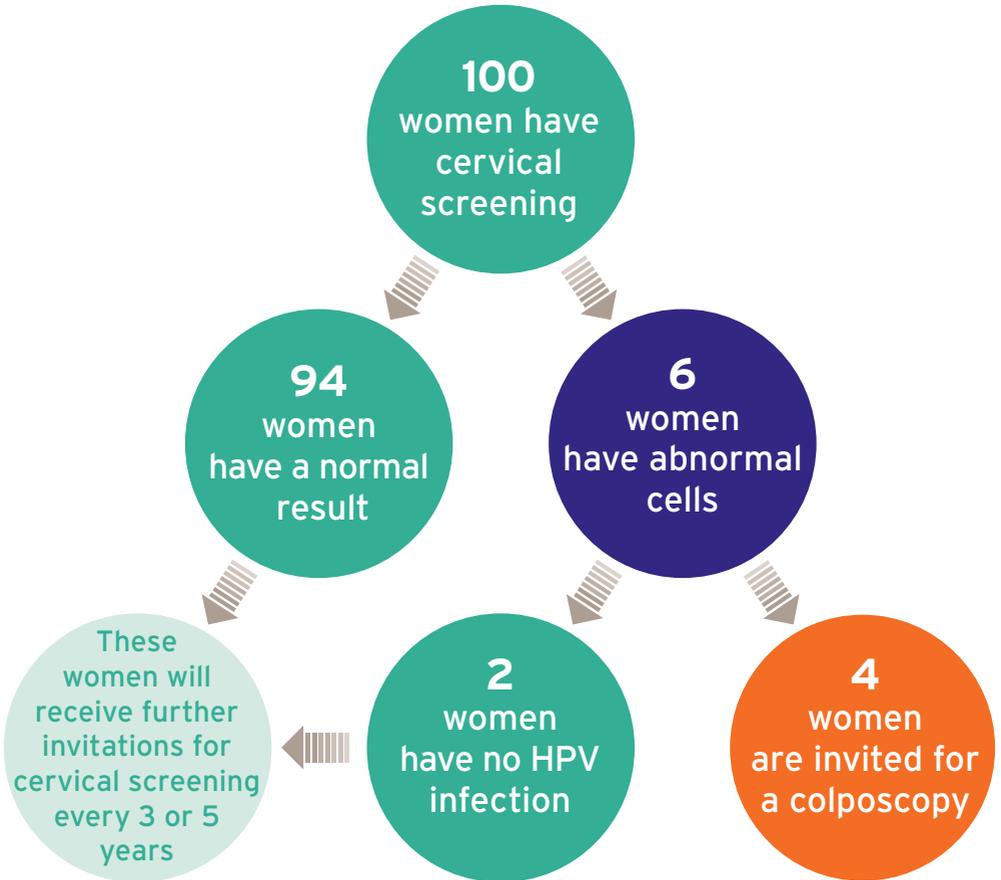
If you have very abnormal cells, you will be offered a colposcopy to check your cervix more closely.

Rarely, women have possible cancer cells in their sample

If you have this result, you will be invited to see a specialist as soon as possible. This happens to about 1 in 1,000 women.

Some women will need another cervical screening test before they get their result

Sometimes women need to have the test repeated, because the sample was not clear enough. If this happens, you will be invited to have another test. This happens in about 2 out of every 100 screening tests.



What is a colposcopy?

A colposcopy is a test to see how much of your cervix contains abnormal cells and how serious these are. It is usually carried out in an outpatient clinic at hospital. A specialist will take a close look at your cervix using a magnifying lens and a light (called a colposcope). They may take a small sample (a biopsy) to check any areas of your cervix which look unusual. If the abnormal cells are serious, you may need treatment to remove the cells. This helps prevent cervical cancer.

Colposcopy results

Your colposcopy may show that you have abnormal cells that should be removed

If you are found to have serious abnormal cells, these can be removed. This is also usually done during colposcopy, in an outpatient clinic at hospital.

About half the women who have a colposcopy are found to have abnormal cells that need to be removed.

Your colposcopy may show that you have cancer

Rarely, women will be diagnosed with cancer through screening. Cancers diagnosed through screening tend to be found at an earlier stage. Women who have early stage cervical cancers are more likely to survive than women with later stage cancers.

What are the benefits of cervical screening?

Cervical screening helps prevent cervical cancer. It stops about 1 woman getting cervical cancer for every 100 women who have screening.

Since the NHS Cervical Screening Programme was introduced in 1988, the number of women getting cervical cancer in England has gone down from over 4,100 a year to 2,300 a year in 2010.

Cervical screening saves as many as 5,000 lives from cervical cancer a year in the UK.

What are the risks of cervical screening?

The risks of cervical screening come from removing abnormal cells during a colposcopy and not from the screening test itself. Removing abnormal cells can sometimes cause bleeding or an infection, and it can also affect future pregnancies. Women who get pregnant after having abnormal cells removed are slightly more likely to have their baby 1 to 2 months early.

Not every woman who has abnormal cells removed would have gone on to develop cervical cancer. But everyone with serious abnormal cells is offered treatment to remove them because it is not possible to tell who will and who will not develop cervical cancer.

What are the symptoms of cervical cancer?

Cancer can develop between your regular screening tests. So it is important to look out for anything that is unusual for you, especially the following:

- Bleeding between your periods, after sex, or after the menopause.
- Vaginal discharge.
- Pain or discomfort during sex.

If you have any of these changes, see a doctor as soon as possible. Don't wait for your next cervical screening appointment.

Usually these symptoms won't mean you have cancer, but if you are found to have cancer, getting it diagnosed and treated early can mean you are more likely to survive.

What affects my chances of getting cervical cancer?

Having cervical screening lowers your chances of getting cervical cancer.

Almost all cases of cervical cancer are caused by HPV infections. HPV can be passed on through any type of sexual activity with a man or a woman.

Women and men who have had more sexual partners are more likely to get HPV infections. But HPV is so common that most people will have the virus at some point in their life.

HPV is found on the skin around the whole genital area, and can be spread through any type of sexual activity. This means that condoms do not always protect you from getting an HPV infection.

Smoking increases the risk of cervical cancer because it makes it harder for your body to get rid of HPV infections.

Girls aged 12 to 13 are now offered a vaccination to protect them against the types of HPV that cause cervical cancer.

What happens to my sample after screening?

Your screening sample will be kept by the laboratory for at least 10 years. Your result will also be kept on a national secure computer system so that the NHS can compare your latest result with ones you have had before. Your results may be seen by staff who work elsewhere in the health service, so that they can make sure the service is as good as possible and to improve the skills of specialist staff.

Who can I contact if I have any questions?

If you have any questions about cervical screening, you can talk to your GP, practice nurse or contraceptive clinic. There is more detailed information on cervical screening, including the sources of evidence used in this leaflet on the following websites:

The NHS Cervical Screening Programme
www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervical

Informed Choice about Cancer Screening
www.informedchoiceaboutcancerscreening.org

You may also find the following charity websites provide helpful information about cervical screening:

Cancer Research UK
www.cruk.org

Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust
www.jostrust.org.uk

Healthtalkonline
www.healthtalkonline.org





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www.informedchoiceaboutcancerscreening.org

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