

Q1. What is cervical screening?

A. Cervical screening is not a test for cancer. It is a method of preventing cancer by detecting and treating early abnormalities which, if left untreated, could lead to cancer in a woman's cervix (the neck of the womb). A sample of cells is taken from the cervix for analysis. A doctor or nurse inserts an instrument (a speculum) to open the woman's vagina and uses a small soft brush to sweep around the cervix. Most women consider the procedure to be only mildly uncomfortable.

Q2. What are the benefits of screening?

A. The programme aims to reduce the number of women who develop cervical cancer (incidence) and the number of women who die from it. It does this by regularly screening all women aged between 25 to 64 so that conditions which might otherwise develop into cancer can be identified and treated.

- Cervical cancer is the 11th most common cancer among women in the UK, and the most common cancer in women under 35.
- Cervical screening saves approximately 2,000 lives per year in England.

Q3. At what age do women receive invitations to attend for cervical screening?

A. The cervical screening programme is for all women aged 25 to 64. The initial invitation is sent at age 24.5 to allow sufficient time for women to make their appointment and ensure they are screened by the time they are aged 25.

Q4. How many invitations will a woman receive?

A. Invitation letters are sent to every woman aged 25-64, registered with a GP. Invitation letters are sent approximately 6 weeks before the test is due. If the recipient does not attend for a test a reminder letter is sent. If after 14 weeks the recipient has not attended for screening the GP practice is informed and it is up to the practice to follow this up with a third letter and actively encourage their patients to attend when their test is due.

Women are recalled as follows:

- One year for those women on follow up/ early recall.
- Three years for women aged 49 and under on routine recall.
- Five years for women aged 50+ on routine recall.

Q5. How often are women invited for screening?

A. Aged 25 to 49 every 3 years. Aged 50 to 64 every 5 years.

Q6. Where can women have cervical screening?

A. Women can choose to be screened at their GP practice or sexual health and contraception service. Visit the Screening Saves Lives website for details of services available in your area.

Q7. Who will take the test?

A. Tests are carried out by trained nurses or doctors. You can request a female to carry out the test when the appointment is made.



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Q8. What is HPV?

A. Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a very common virus that can be transmitted during intimate sexual contact. Most women acquire HPV at some point in their lives, and in most cases will get rid of the virus without ever knowing they have had it. HPV is linked to the development of abnormal cervical cells. If left untreated, these abnormal cells might develop into cervical cancer.

Q9. Should women who have been vaccinated for HPV still attend for cervical screening?

A. Yes - vaccinated women are advised to continue accepting their invitations for cervical screening as the vaccination will not prevent all types of cervical cancer.

Q10. Why are women under 25 and over 65 not invited for screening?

A. Cervical cancer is linked to persistent infection with HPV which is extremely rare in women under the age of 25 with just 2.6 cases per 100,000 women. HPV is a very common virus, which can cause minor abnormalities in the cells of the cervix. In the great majority of younger women, the infection and the abnormalities go away naturally. If these women were screened they would test positive and be sent for unnecessary treatment.

The natural history and progression of cervical cancer means it is highly unlikely that women of 65 and over will go on to develop the disease if their last three tests were negative. Women over the age of 65 who have never had cervical screening or have not been tested since the age of 50 can request a test.

Q11. What about women who are not registered with a GP?

A. Women who are not registered with a general practice will not receive invitations for screening but can request a screening at a GP practice or a sexual health clinic.

Q12. Are women tested for sexually transmitted infections when they attend for screening?

A. Testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is not part of the NHS Cervical Screening Programme. If the sample taker thinks it is appropriate for an STI test this can be arranged.

Q13. What do the results mean?

A. Your sample will be primarily tested for HPV, there are three possible results:

- 1. HPV negative** - this means it is highly unlikely that you will have any abnormal cervical cells, even if you did it would be extremely unlikely that they would cause a problem. You will be invited for screening again in 3 or 5 years (depending on your age)
- 2. HPV positive: no abnormal cells** - this means that HPV was present so the cells were also tested for abnormalities but no abnormalities were found. You will be invited back for screening sooner than usual (your letter will explain when) to check if your immune system has got rid of the HPV (this happens in most cases).
- 3. HPV positive: abnormal cells found** - there are several 'grades' of abnormal cells, some are more serious than others. Your result letter will explain what your results mean and you will be referred for a colposcopy which is a closer look at the cervix to see if any treatment is needed.

Q14. What about women who have symptoms e.g. irregular bleeding?

A. Women with any symptoms should seek advice from their GP and not wait for a routine screening offer.



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