



Human papillomavirus and cervical screening

Updated 1/9/25

Why does the NHS offer cervical screening?

The Human Papillomavirus (HPV) causes nearly all cervical cancers. NHS cervical screening helps detect HPV and prevent cervical cancer. It stops about one woman getting cervical cancer for every 100 women who have screening. It saves as many as 5000 lives from cervical cancer each year in the UK by detecting HPV and abnormal cells in the cervix that could develop into cancer, if left untreated.

On 1st July 2025 the screening program was updated based on research. Women and people with a cervix aged 25–49 years who test HPV negative, will be invited every 5 years, instead of every 3. Those aged 50 to 64 will continue to be invited every 5 years.

This change is strongly backed by robust scientific evidence. Studies have shown that if a person tests negative for HPV, they are extremely unlikely to go on to develop cervical cancer within the next 10 years.

If your cervical screening shows you have HPV, you may be invited for more frequent screenings to check HPV has cleared and, if not, if any cell changes have developed.

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 is found at the top of your vagina.

What causes cervical cancer?

Nearly all cervical cancers are caused by cancer causing strains of a virus called High Risk Human Papillomavirus (or HrHPV for short).

HPV is a very common virus and most people will be infected with it at some point in their life. It is a virus that is passed on through skin-to-skin contact particularly through any type of sexual activity with a man or a 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 does not happen and the abnormal cells can go on to develop into cancer.

Cervical screening and HPV testing

Looking for HPV as the first test on screening samples, you may hear it being called 'HPV primary screening'. It helps us to more quickly identify who may need treatment and who can simply be called back for screening in 5 years' time.

HPV primary screening

Once your cervical screening sample is sent to the laboratory, it will first be tested for HPV. If HPV is found, your sample will also be looked at for abnormal cells. If you don't have HPV, then it is extremely unlikely that you will have any abnormal cervical cells.

Testing for HPV first should benefit women because:

- More abnormal cervical cells will be picked up
- Women without HPV can be reassured that they are at extremely low risk of developing cervical cancer (although we cannot say 'no risk')
- The information we are gathering during the introduction of HPV primary screening will help us improve the screening programme

Screening results

Negative/normal: patients who have a negative test result will be notified of this by an NHS App message. It will also appear as an NHS App notification. If the NHS App message isn't read within 72 hours, a letter will be sent as a failsafe. Letters will be sent out to those without the NHSApp.

Abnormal: letters will continue to be delivered by post.

There are 3 main types of result from HPV primary screening:

- No HPV found (HPV negative)

If no HPV is found then no further tests will be done. If you don't have HPV, 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 simply be called back for screening again in 5 years' time.

- HPV found (HPV positive) but no abnormal cervical cells found

If HPV is found, the sample will also be tested for abnormal cervical cells. If none are found, your result will say you have HPV but no abnormal cells.

You will be asked to come for screening again in 12 months' time. This is so we can check that your immune system has cleared the HPV (this happens in most cases). If it hasn't cleared, you may be at greater risk of developing abnormal cells. If the HPV infection continues you will be referred for colposcopy.

- HPV found (HPV positive) and abnormal cervical cells found

There are several grades of abnormal cells. Your result letter will explain what your results mean.

> If you have HPV and any grade of abnormal cervical cells you will be referred for colposcopy.

> Colposcopy is a closer examination of the cervix. It is carried out in a similar way to cervical screening. If you are invited for colposcopy, you will be sent an appointment letter to attend this clinic.

- It is also possible to have an 'inadequate' result. This may be due to a technical problem, such as if the laboratory cannot get an HPV test result from your sample or cannot see if abnormal cells are present or not.

Can HPV be treated?

No, there isn't a treatment to get rid of the virus. For most women, their immune system will get rid of HPV – like getting rid of a common cold. But we can treat abnormal cervical cells, especially if they are found early on. Early treatment means that cervical cancer can be prevented.

Invitations for screening

The way people can receive cervical screening invitations and reminders has also changed as this is now possible via the NHS App. To receive these, please download the NHS app and make sure your notifications are switched on.

Find out more <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-app> If you don't wish to use the App, we'll attempt to contact you by text message or letter so, don't worry, you won't miss an invitation

Where can I get more information?

<https://www.nhs.uk/tests-and-treatments/cervical-screening/what-is-cervical-screening/>

<https://northerncanceralliance.nhs.uk/pathway/prevention-awareness-and-screening/cervical-screening/nhs-cervical-screening-programme-changes-from-1st-july-2025/>

<https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/cervical-cancer/getting-diagnosed/screening/about>

<https://www.jostrust.org.uk/information/colposcopy/>