

# Cervical Screening Test

The Cervical Screening Test checks for the presence of certain high risk HPV (human papillomavirus) types and changes in the cells of the cervix (neck of the womb, at the top of the vagina).

It is a screening test to find any early warning signs that cervical cancer might develop in the future. If these changes are found at screening, further tests may be done to see if treatment is needed. The new Cervical Screening Test replaced the traditional Pap smear in 2017.

## How is the new Cervical Screening Test different to a Pap smear?

The traditional Pap smear looked for abnormal cells in the cervix. The new Cervical Screening Test looks for HPV, the virus that causes cells in the cervix to change or become abnormal. Persistent infection with HPV causes over 99% of all cervical cancers, although the time between HPV infection and it perhaps turning into cervical cancer is very long, often more than 10 years. Based on new evidence and better technology the new Cervical Screening Test will improve early detection and save lives.

## How is the screening test done?

The Cervical Screening Test is a quick and simple test which should only take a few minutes. The sample is taken in the same way as a Pap smear.

Our doctor or specialist nurse will gently insert an instrument called a speculum into your vagina which allows them to view your cervix. A small brush is used to pick up some cells from inside the opening of the cervix. Some women find the test momentarily uncomfortable, but it shouldn't be painful. The sample is then sent to a laboratory where it is tested for HPV and changes in the cells of the cervix.

Alternatively, you can collect your own sample from the vagina with a cotton swab and without a speculum. You will be given instructions on how to collect the sample and offered a private place to collect the sample. The test is just as effective at detecting HPV and preventing cervical cancer.

You may not be eligible for self-collection if you have a previous history of abnormal test results, or if you have symptoms.

## When should I have a Cervical Screening Test?

The Cervical Screening Test is a test for healthy people with no symptoms. If you have a cervix and have ever been sexually active you should have regular Cervical Screening Tests from the age of 25 – even if you are no longer having sex. This includes male to female, and female to female sex.

Those who test negative for HPV will only need the Cervical Screening Test every 5 years (Previously, it was every 2 years for Pap smears). Please be aware that Medicare will not cover the cost of more than 1 test every 5 years, unless you have an abnormal test or have symptoms.

## What is the human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is passed on during sex, even by genital skin-to-skin contact, so condoms may only provide limited protection. HPV infection is therefore very common and most people will have HPV infection at some time in their lives and not know it. In most cases it clears up by itself in 1-2 years without causing any problems. Persistent HPV infection with one or more of the cancer-causing types is the main cause of cervical cancer.

## I had the HPV vaccine (Gardasil) - Do I still need the test?

Yes. The cervical cancer vaccine only protects against some of the many strains of HPV that are known to cause cervical cancer. The Cervical Screening Test is recommended for all women and people with a cervix who have ever been sexually active - regardless of whether you have been vaccinated or not.

## What if my Cervical Screening Test is abnormal?

If your screening test is positive for HPV, the laboratory will do further tests on your screening sample to look for changes in the cells from the cervix. If your results show

cell changes, we may recommend that you have another Cervical Screening Test after a shorter period of time, or that you make an appointment for a colposcopy. Additionally, if certain high-risk HPV types are found to be present, you will also be recommended to make an appointment for a colposcopy.

Colposcopy is a further test performed by a specialist gynaecologist who will look at your cervix using a magnifying instrument called a colposcope. If necessary, a tiny sample of tissue will be taken to be tested in more detail. Depending on the colposcopy result, the gynaecologist will discuss the next steps with you, which may take the form of further screening and observation, or active treatment. Treatment is usually very successful.

## When can I stop having Cervical Screening Tests?

You should make regular screening part of your life - a Cervical Screening Test every 5 years is your best protection against cervical cancer.

Between 70 and 74 your doctor will advise you to have an exit HPV test before leaving the cervical screening program.



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