



Important information about your free HPV cervical screening



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

CervicalCheck
AN CLÁR NÁISIÚNTA SCAGTHÁSTÁLA CEIRBHEACS
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME

What is a cervical screening test?

A cervical screening test checks the health of your cervix. The cervix is the opening to your womb from your vagina.

It's not a test for cancer. It's a test that can help **prevent** cancer from developing.

Cervical screening is one of the best ways to protect yourself from cervical cancer so do not delay in doing this test every time one is due.

What is HPV cervical screening?

This is a new way of cervical screening. It is called HPV cervical screening and was introduced in Ireland in 2020. This type of cervical screening has already been introduced in Australia, England and Wales.

Your cervical screening sample is first checked for human papillomavirus (HPV) – a virus that can cause cervical cancer.

If HPV is found, the same test sample is checked to see if you have any abnormal (pre-cancerous) cell changes in your cervix.

This way of screening:

- is a better way of cervical screening
- prevents more cancers
- means some people will have fewer tests

If you have had a smear test before, having a cervical screening test will feel the same.

The only changes you may notice are:

- most people will be invited for screening less often
- most people aged 30 to 44 will now have a screening test every 5 years instead of every 3 years
- all eligible women and people with a cervix are screened up to age 65

Not a test for cancer

A cervical screening test is not a test for cancer. It's a test to help prevent cancer from developing.

A screening test looks to see if you might be at risk of developing cancer in the future. This is why it can be effective in reducing the risk of cancer.

Like all screening tests, cervical screening tests are for people who are healthy and do not have any symptoms of cervical cancer. (see page 15 for a list of symptoms).

Like all screening programmes, HPV cervical screening is not perfect.

Some people will still develop cervical cancer despite regular screening. While screening can help to reduce the risk of cervical cancer, it cannot eliminate it. Going for regular HPV cervical screening is one of the best ways to protect yourself from cervical cancer.

What is HPV?

HPV is the name for a very common group of viruses. There are more than 100 types of HPV and some types can cause cervical cancer.

You can get HPV from any kind of sexual or skin-to-skin contact of the genital area, not just penetrative sex.

Most people will have HPV at some time in their lives.

Your body's immune system can clear it within 18 months.

For most people, the virus goes away on its own and does not cause any harm. But in some cases, the HPV virus can persist and cause changes in the body's cells that can cause cancer.

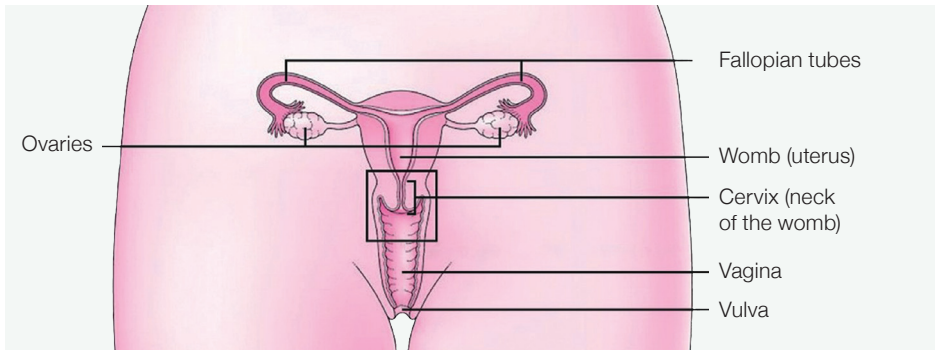
This is why it is important to attend regular cervical screening when it is due.

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is a cancer of the cervix. It happens when cells in the cervix become abnormal – usually because of a persistent HPV infection – and change slowly over time.

In most cases it takes 10 to 15 years for these cells to go from normal to abnormal to cancer. Because the cells change at a slow rate, regular HPV cervical screening can help detect these changes early.

See page 15 for symptoms of cervical cancer.



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Who should have cervical screening?

Women and people with a cervix between the ages of 25 and 65 should go for regular HPV cervical screening when it's due. If you have had a hysterectomy or you are not sure if you need HPV cervical screening, contact your GP (doctor) or clinic to find out.

How do I arrange a cervical screening test?

If you are on our register (list), we will send you a letter to invite you to make an appointment with a **GP (doctor) or clinic** registered with CervicalCheck. If you or someone you care for has a disability or needs additional support to take part in CervicalCheck email **access@cervicalcheck.ie** or call the Freephone number **1800 45 45 55**.

You do not need to be on our register or to receive a letter to have a test. If your screening test is due or you missed your last cervical screening test, you can go ahead and make an appointment with your GP or clinic.

It is best to have a HPV cervical screening test when you are not having your period.

How often should I have cervical screening?

- If you are aged 25 to 29, you will usually have a cervical screening test every 3 years.
- If you are aged 30 to 65, you will usually have a cervical screening test every 5 years.

Women and people with a cervix aged 25 to 29 are screened more often because they are more likely to have HPV.

Some people will require screening more often. We'll tell you if you do.

What are the benefits of cervical screening?

Regular HPV cervical screening:

- saves lives
- can find HPV before it causes abnormal cells in the cervix
- can find abnormal cell changes before symptoms of cervical cancer develop
- can find abnormal cell changes when they are easier to treat

Finding HPV and abnormal cells early is the best way to prevent cervical cancer developing.

This is why having regular screening tests is important. It's one of the best ways to protect yourself from cervical cancer so do not delay having a cervical screening test every time it's due.

Since CervicalCheck started in 2008:

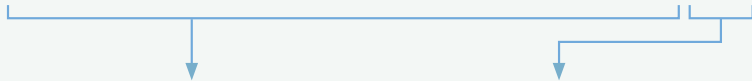
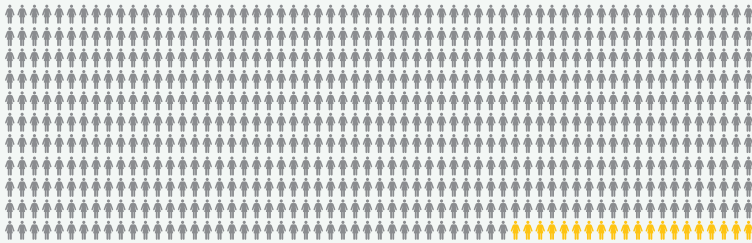
- more than 3 million screening tests have been carried out
- the number of people who develop cervical cancer has fallen
- over 100,000 cases of abnormal cervical cells have been detected, many of which could have developed into cancer if not detected through screening and treated where necessary

What are the limitations of cervical screening?

The main limitations of cervical screening are:

- cervical screening will not prevent all cases of cervical cancer
- some people will still develop cervical cancer despite regular screening
- some abnormal cell changes may be missed
- screening will not find every abnormal cell change
- sometimes test results are not accurate, see section about 'Inaccurate results' on page 11

For every 1,000 people screened, about **20** will have abnormal cervical cells



About **18 of these 20 will have** these abnormal cells found through screening



About **2 of these 20 will not have** these abnormal cells found through screening and may develop cancer

Why are some abnormal cell changes missed?

Your sample will be checked for HPV first. If HPV is found, it will also be checked for abnormal cells.

But not everyone who develops cervical cancer will have HPV found at screening.

A negative HPV test – one where no HPV was found – also does not mean you won't get the infection in the future.

Abnormal cells can also be missed. This is because:

- sometimes abnormal cells can look similar to normal cells
- there may be very few abnormal cells in the sample
- the person reading your sample may miss the abnormality (this happens occasionally, no matter how experienced they are)

No test in any screening programme will find every person who has abnormal cervical cells.

Cervical cancer takes many years to develop. In most cases, it takes 10 to 15 years for cells to go from normal to abnormal to cancer.

If HPV was found in your sample, you will have a repeat test in 12 months. This means that if abnormal cells were missed on one screening test, they should be found quickly on the next test.

This is why you should always attend your cervical screening test when it's due.

How is a HPV cervical screening test done?

The screening test usually takes about 5 minutes.

1. You will be asked to undress from the waist down and lie on a couch.
2. You can lie on your side or on your back, whichever is more comfortable for you.
3. The doctor or nurse will gently put an instrument called a speculum into your vagina. This holds the walls of the vagina open, so they can see your cervix.
4. A small soft brush will be used to gently collect a sample of cells from the cervix.

Some people find the procedure uncomfortable or embarrassing, but for most it's not painful. If you find the test painful, tell the doctor or nurse as they may be able to reduce your discomfort.

What happens to my sample?

Your sample will go to a quality-assured laboratory (lab). In the lab your sample will be tested to see if you have a HPV infection. If HPV is found, two experts will examine your sample for cell changes. If they find any changes, you will need a follow-up test called a colposcopy. A colposcopy is a more detailed look at your cervix. See page 12 for more details.

How will I find out about my test results?

Your results will be sent to you by post, usually within 4 weeks of the test. They will also be sent to your GP (doctor) or clinic.

What do my test results mean?

There are four possible results.

1. HPV not found

Your results show you do not have a HPV infection at this time. You will have your next cervical screening test in 3 or 5 years depending on your age.

2. HPV found and no abnormal cell changes found

Your results show you have a HPV infection but no abnormal cell changes were seen. You should have a repeat test in 12 months. This will give your body time to clear the HPV infection.

3. HPV found and abnormal cell changes found

Your results show you have a HPV infection and abnormal cell changes in your cervix. You need a follow-up test called a colposcopy – a more detailed look at your cervix. It is similar to having cervical screening. (See page 12)

4. Inadequate sample

This means that the lab could not process your screening test sample. You will be asked to repeat your cervical screening in three months.

When we have your results, we will send them to you with further information about what they mean. You can also find more information on [hse.ie/cervicalcheck](https://www.hse.ie/cervicalcheck)

HPV infection and your partner

HPV can stay dormant (sleeping) in your body for years before it becomes active. It may never cause any cell changes.

You can have HPV for years and not know it. This makes it difficult to tell when you got the infection.

You can have a HPV infection even if you have not been sexually active for some time.

If HPV is found, it does not mean your partner has had sex with someone else.

Inaccurate results

Sometimes test results are inaccurate.

As a consequence, you may have further tests at colposcopy that you do not need.

Or you may be told that you do not need further tests or treatment, when there is actually a risk of cancer at the time.

We call these results ‘false positives’ and ‘false negatives’, respectively.

False positives and false negatives are unavoidable. They happen in every screening programme.

False positive results

A result may be reported as positive even though no abnormality was found in the cervix. A ‘false positive’ may mean you will have further tests that ultimately confirm there was no risk of cancer at that time.

False negative results

A result may be reported as negative even though an abnormality was present in the cervix. A ‘false negative’ may mean that you do not have further tests when there may have been a risk of cancer at the time you were screened.

False positives and false negatives may cause you to lose trust in the screening programme. But the benefits of cervical screening outweigh these limitations.

Cervical screening is still one of the best ways to protect against developing cervical cancer. See ‘Symptoms of cervical cancer’ (page 15) for more information.

What is a colposcopy?

A colposcopy is a detailed examination of the cervix. It is free when you are referred through the CervicalCheck screening programme and is carried out by a doctor or nurse in hospital. It usually takes about 15 to 20 minutes.

If you need a colposcopy, the doctor or nurse who took your screening test will give you more information and refer you to a colposcopy clinic.

HPV vaccine

The free HPV vaccine given to students (boys and girls) in first year of secondary school can protect against some types of HPV. Even if you have had the vaccine, you will still need to have regular HPV cervical screening. This is because the vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV. See **hpv.ie** for more information.

Giving your consent

Each time you have a cervical screening test we will ask you to give your consent by signing a cervical screening form before the test. If you cannot sign the form, you will be asked to give your consent either verbally or by making a mark on the form in front of a doctor or nurse.

This is to confirm that you:

- have been told about cervical screening and its benefits and limitations
- understand this information
- have checked that your name, address and other details are correct (this helps us confirm we have your current address to communicate with you)
- allow us to receive, hold and exchange your personal information and screening history with those who deliver the HPV cervical screening programme

Remember: Only you can give your consent to be part of our programme. You have to consent before you have your screening test.

You can withdraw your consent at any time by contacting us on Freephone **1800 45 45 55** or emailing **info@cervicalcheck.ie**

This means we will not contact you about the cervical screening programme in the future.

How do we use your personal information?

CervicalCheck takes and securely stores your personal information (name, address, phone number, date of birth, PPSN, surname at birth and mother's maiden name) and cervical screening history. Your cervical screening history relates to your participation in CervicalCheck.

It can include HPV cervical screening results, colposcopy attendances, treatments and biopsy (test sample) results.

We will use your information to contact you when your next screening test is due or when your results are available. We also exchange your information with the other health services that deliver the programme. This includes the doctor or nurse who takes your screening test, the laboratory, colposcopy clinics and the National Cancer Registry Ireland. This is to maintain and improve the quality of the service.

We may use your screening test sample in teaching, in reviews and audits and to check the quality and effectiveness of the programme. We may also use your information to invite you to take part in research.

It is your choice to take part in screening or not. We will never use your name in any reports, when teaching or in reviews. We will keep your personal information safe, secure and confidential in line with current data protection regulations.

You will have full and open access to your personal information held by CervicalCheck upon request. It is important that you let CervicalCheck know if your details change. To find out how to access your records, see **[hse.ie/gdpr/data-requests](https://www.hse.ie/gdpr/data-requests)**

For further information see the HSE Privacy Notice – Patients and Service Users at **[hse.ie/gdpr](https://www.hse.ie/gdpr)**

Communicating with you

We will communicate with you in an open, honest, timely and transparent manner if:

- something goes wrong with your care
- you experience harm as a result of your care
- we think that harm may have occurred

This means that we will keep you fully informed of the facts and details about your participation in the cervical screening programme.

How can I reduce my risk of getting cervical cancer?

You can reduce your risk of cervical cancer by:

- having regular screening tests
- talking to your doctor about any concerns or symptoms
- stopping smoking if you do, as smoking can prevent the body's immune system from clearing infections such as HPV

Symptoms of cervical cancer

Outside of your regular screening tests please be aware of symptoms that might mean you have cervical cancer. Contact your doctor if you have any concerns.

Symptoms to look out for:

- bleeding between periods
- vaginal spotting or unusual discharge
- pain during sex
- bleeding after sex
- a pain in your pelvis (anywhere between your belly button and the top of your thighs)

Feedback and contact information

We welcome your feedback.

Email: info@cervicalcheck.ie

Freephone: 1800 45 45 55

Website: hse.ie/cervicalcheck

Post: CervicalCheck, Freepost LK407, Limerick



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