

# Important information for women about the cervical smear test

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## What is a cervical smear?

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This involves taking some cells from the cervix to examine under a microscope. The cervix is the narrow entrance to the neck of the womb at the top of the vagina. When you go for a smear test a speculum is inserted in the vagina which allows the cervix to be visible. Cells are then lightly scraped off with a special brush and washed into a vial of liquid. The sample is then sent off to the laboratory so that the cells can be examined under the microscope.

A qualified doctor or wellwoman trained health adviser will perform the test. You will be asked to undress from the waist down and lie on a couch. The procedure is very quick, although some women find it slightly uncomfortable.

The best time to have a smear test is in the middle of your menstrual cycle. It can be done at other times, although it is best to avoid the time when you are having your period. Chemicals can also affect the test, so if you use a spermicide, a barrier method of contraception or a lubricant jelly, you should avoid sex for 24 hours before the test.

## What are the benefits of testing?

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Cervical smear screening has contributed to a considerable reduction in the number of new cases of cervical cancer in the UK. Having a regular smear enables the regular sampling of cells from the cervix which may demonstrate pre-cancerous changes. If suspicious cells are detected it means that the cervix must be fully checked by a gynaecologist.

Treatment of pre-cancerous changes prevents development of cancer in the vast majority of cases. If cancer has developed but is detected at an early stage, the majority of women can be completely cured.

## Who is at risk of cervical cancer and who should be screened?

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Cancer of the cervix can affect women of all ages. While cervical cancer is more common among older women, there is evidence that the incidence is increasing in younger women. All women who have ever had sexual intercourse should have regular tests from age 18 to 65 years.

The disease is much more common in women who have never had a cervical smear or do not attend regularly.

The main risk factors include an early age of first intercourse and pregnancy, increased number of sexual partners and sexual infections like warts, herpes and human papilloma virus. Smoking can double the risk of getting the disease. The risk is decreased with the use of condoms and barrier methods of contraception.

All sexually active women between the ages of 18 and 65 should have a regular smear test. The NHS offers a cervical smear to all women aged between 25 and 64 every three to five years. At Bupa you can have an annual cervical smear if required. The results of Bupa smear tests are passed on to the NHS so that there is a complete smear record but this will not prevent you from having your NHS test at the appropriate time.

If you have been screened regularly until the age of 65 years, you are most unlikely to develop cervical cancer. If you have symptoms at any age you should seek advice from your doctor.

## Liquid based cytology (LBC)

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Liquid based cytology is a modern way of processing a cervical smear. The smear is taken in the same way as a conventional smear but instead of being spread on a glass slide, cells are washed into a vial of liquid.

The advantages of liquid based cytology over the previous glass slide smear method are that the smear is more likely to be of a quality that the laboratory can interpret and there is a greater likelihood of picking up early abnormalities.



## What are the limitations of testing?

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Almost 85 percent of women will have a normal smear but cervical smear tests cannot pick up all cancers. Around five percent of reported normal smears might in fact be abnormal when reviewed. This means that a normal smear means there is a low risk of cancer **but not absolutely no risk**. The most common causes of a smear not detecting cancer are:

- the cervical cells are not sampled during the smear taking.
- the sample is not correctly interpreted.
- the cancer is an adenocarcinoma which is not easily detected by the smear test.
- a cancer develops between tests.

Fortunately cervical cancer usually develops over a period of years and so repeat testing often detects the majority of abnormalities missed in a previous test. This is why regular repeated testing is strongly advised.

## What happens if there is an abnormal result or the smear is inadequate?

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Between one and two percent of smears will need to be repeated before they can be read properly by the laboratory. This can occur for a variety of reasons, for example, too few cells have been sampled from the cervix, which may occur with women after the menopause.

If abnormalities are detected, these can range from very minor (six percent of smears) to more serious changes (up to two percent of smears). Most of the minor abnormalities will revert to normal without treatment. However, some abnormalities require further follow-up, which may be either by a repeat test or referral to a gynaecologist for further investigation. These further tests usually involve a colposcopy. This procedure is carried out in outpatients and involves looking at the cervix with a microscope and taking samples.

If a repeated cervical smear is suggested, it is very important to have this done. This can be done either at a Bupa Health Assessment Centre, by your own GP, Family Planning Clinic, or other qualified clinician.

If your smear is inadequate for technical reasons we will be happy to repeat this free of charge. **It is very important that we are given the result if the smear is performed elsewhere to ensure that all abnormal results are followed up.** The Bupa Health Assessment centre or laboratory will contact you for the result and we would appreciate your co-operation in giving it to us.

We will ask you for your permission to pass your results to your local Health Authority or Health Board. It is to your advantage to have the results of the cervical smear test fed into the National Programme because if there is an abnormality at some later stage, all the results can be reviewed together.

## What if I have other symptoms between my smear tests?

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As explained above, like most medical tests, cervical screening is not 100 percent accurate in determining abnormalities. If you have any problems or symptoms, especially vaginal bleeding or blood stained discharge between periods and after intercourse, lower abdominal pain or problems passing water and motions then you should see your doctor.

## Human papilloma virus (HPV)

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Some strains of HPV are associated with the development of cervical cancer. If your smear is abnormal we will test it for the presence of HPV. In the absence of HPV, the risk of developing an abnormality that may become cancerous is very low and the laboratory may advise a routine follow up.

## Questions

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If you have any questions or concerns please ask your Bupa doctor or wellwoman trained health adviser for further advice when you attend.

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