

# preventing cervical cancer

why **screening** is important



## Most cases of cervical cancer could be prevented

Thanks to cervical screening doctors can find and treat early changes in the cervix **before** they develop into cancer. Cervical screening is sometimes referred to as the 'smear test'.

This leaflet gives information about:

- the cervix
- why it is so important to go for screening
- what will happen at your screening appointment
- symptoms of cervical cancer
- what affects your risk of cervical cancer.

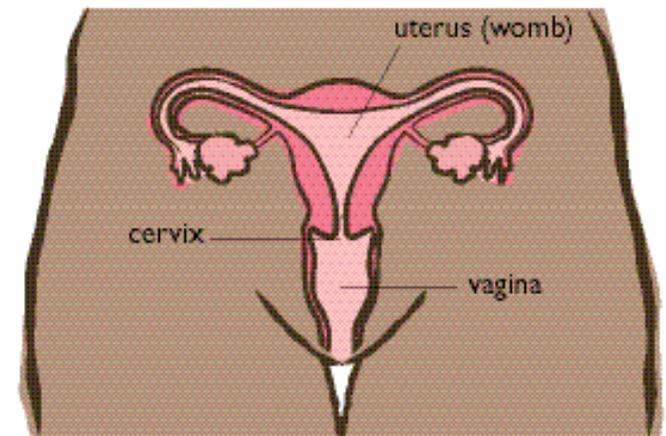
## How **common** is it?

Because of the national screening programme the number of new cases of cervical cancer is now falling.

Doctors diagnose around 3,000 new cases of cervical cancer in the UK every year. It can affect women of any age who are, or once were, sexually active.

## What is the cervix?

The cervix is a very strong muscle that connects a woman's womb and her vagina. It forms a small opening which lets through menstrual blood and sperm. During childbirth the cervix opens up to let the baby out.



## What is **cervical** cancer?

Cervical cancer usually starts in cells on the surface of the cervix. It happens when cells begin to grow and divide out of control. These cells gradually spread into the tissue of the cervix. From there they may move to other parts of the body such as the vagina, womb or bowel.

A virus called HPV can cause changes in the cervix, that may lead to cervical cancer.

## What is HPV?

Scientists have linked nearly all cases of cervical cancer to a common virus called **Human Papilloma Virus** or HPV.

- HPV is a **sexually transmitted infection**, caught by having sexual contact with someone who has it.
- Most sexually active women will be infected with HPV at some point because it is **very common**.
- The types of HPV that cause cervical cancer have **no symptoms**.
- Usually the virus does not cause any problems and **clears up on its own**.
- But if HPV persists it can cause changes in the cells of the cervix. These changes may **lead to cancer** if left untreated.
- **HPV** itself does not show up in cervical screening and cannot be treated.
- Instead, cervical screening detects early cell changes in the cervix that are caused by HPV. Treating these cells **prevents cancer** developing.
- Some people may have heard that HPV causes **genital warts**. This is true, but the types of HPV that cause warts are different from the ones that cause cancer.

## Why is screening important?

Cervical screening (also known as the 'smear test') checks the health of the cervix. It helps doctors find changes in the cervix **before** they have a chance to develop into cancer.

Treating early changes can **prevent** cervical cancer from developing. Treatment is easy and effective.

Cervical screening saves the lives of thousands of women every year.

## Who can go for screening?

Local health services across the UK invite women for free cervical screening at their local GP surgery or clinic.

How often you are invited depends on where you live and how old you are. In general, women are invited for cervical screening every 3–5 years, from their early twenties to their early sixties.

To find out more about screening in your area please use the regional contact details on the back of the leaflet.

## What happens at cervical screening?

The test is very simple and only takes around five minutes. It should not be painful although some women do find it slightly uncomfortable.

### You can ask to see a female doctor or nurse.

The doctor or nurse will take a sample of cells from your cervix using a spatula and sometimes a small brush. These cells will then be sent to a laboratory to be looked at under a microscope.

Most women have normal results, although sometimes a sample isn't clear enough and you may need to have another test. If you have an abnormal result your doctor will talk to you about having further tests.

## Does cervical cancer have any symptoms?

Cervical cancer often has **no symptoms**. But, visit your doctor if you notice the following signs:

- bleeding between periods
- bleeding during or after sex
- bleeding after you have been through the menopause
- any unpleasant vaginal discharge
- discomfort or pain during sex.

These symptoms may be signs of other common conditions. They do not necessarily mean you have cancer.

## What affects your risk?

### Not attending screening

If you don't go for screening doctors will not be able to find and treat any early changes in your cervix. These changes could then develop into cervical cancer.

### Smoking

Smoking doubles your risk of developing cervical cancer. This is because the chemicals in cigarettes can affect cells in the cervix.

### A weakened immune system

If your immune system is weak, it is harder for the body to get rid of an HPV infection. You may have a weak immune system if you are HIV positive, or if you are taking certain medicines.

### Number of sexual partners

You can catch HPV from just one partner and be unaware of it for years. But the more people you have sex with, the greater your risk of HPV infection. If your partners have had sex with a lot of other people this also increases your risk.

### Unprotected sex

Condoms protect against many sexually transmitted infections. We think they may also reduce your chances of HPV infection, but we cannot be certain.

### The pill

Recent research shows that long-term use of the pill very slightly increases your risk of cervical cancer. But the pill is a useful form of contraception for many women. Discuss your options with your GP if you are worried.

## Further information

**England:** To find out more about NHS screening, new screening methods and **HPV testing** visit [www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervical](http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervical)

**Scotland:** To find out more about screening in Scotland call 0131 551 8836.

**Wales:** To find out more about screening in Wales visit [www.velindre-tr.wales.nhs.uk/csw/index.html](http://www.velindre-tr.wales.nhs.uk/csw/index.html)

**Northern Ireland:** To find out more about screening in Northern Ireland call 02890 333 700.

For more about cancer visit our patient information website [www.cancerhelp.org.uk](http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk) click on 'specific cancers' then 'cervical cancer'.

If you want to talk in confidence about cancer, call our **information nurses**. Direct line **020 7061 8355** or freephone 0800 (CANCER) 226237 or email [cancer.info@cancer.org.uk](mailto:cancer.info@cancer.org.uk)

Order copies of this and other cancer awareness leaflets online at [www.cancerresearchuk.org/leaflets](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/leaflets) or call **020 7061 8333**.

## About Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is the leading charity dedicated to research on the causes, treatment and prevention of cancer.

[www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

[www.cancerhelp.org.uk](http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk)

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