

NATIONAL
CERVICAL SCREENING
PROGRAM

A joint Australian State and Territory Government Program



A Guide To Understanding Your
Cervical Screening Test Results



Australian Government

INTRODUCTION



This booklet provides you with information to help you better understand your Cervical Screening Test results.

Your healthcare provider will discuss your results and the next steps with you.

It is important that if you experience symptoms at any time, such as abnormal vaginal bleeding, pain or discharge, you should see your healthcare provider immediately.



CERVICAL SCREENING TEST

The new Cervical Screening Test is similar to the Pap test. The new Cervical Screening Test is based on the latest medical and scientific evidence and is more effective at detecting the virus that causes cervical abnormalities at an earlier stage.

It is now better understood how cervical cancer develops. Cervical cancer is rare and it usually takes 10 or more years for the virus that causes most precancerous abnormalities to develop into cervical cancer.

It is expected that the changes to the National Cervical Screening Program following the introduction of the new Cervical Screening Test will protect up to 30% more women from cervical cancer.

What does the Cervical Screening Test detect?

The Cervical Screening Test looks for the common human papillomavirus (HPV) infection in the cells of your cervix.

HPV is so common that many people have it at some point in their lives and never know it as there are usually no symptoms.

What is HPV?

There are many types of HPV infections and most are cleared naturally by the body's immune system within one to two years without causing problems.

HPV is a very common infection that is spread by genital-skin to skin contact during sexual activity. HPV is so common that many people have it at some point in their lives and never know it as there are usually no symptoms.

In rare cases, some types of HPV infection that are not cleared by the body can cause abnormal cervical cell changes.



CERVICAL SCREENING TEST RESULTS

What does my test result mean?

Your healthcare provider will talk to you about your Cervical Screening Test results.

Possible results include:

- Return to screen in five years
- Repeat the HPV test in 12 months
- Refer to specialist
- Unsatisfactory test result

Return to screen in five years

Your screening results indicate you do not have an HPV infection.

The National Cervical Screening Program will send you an invitation to have your next Cervical Screening Test in five years. The latest medical and scientific evidence shows that you can safely return to screen in five years.

Repeat the HPV test in 12 months

Your screening results indicate you do not need further investigation but you should have a repeat test in 12 months.

This is because you have an HPV infection that is likely to be cleared by your body within the next 12 months.

A repeat test in 12 months checks that the infection has gone and you are safe to return to five yearly screening.

If the repeat test shows the HPV infection has not gone, you may need further investigation from a specialist. This does not mean you have developed cancer. It takes about 10 to 15 years for cervical cancer to develop after an HPV infection and cervical cancer is a rare outcome.

Refer to a specialist

Your screening results indicate you have a type of HPV infection that requires further investigation from a specialist or the test has indicated that you have abnormalities that require treatment.

This does not mean you have developed cancer. It takes about 10 to 15 years for cervical cancer to develop after an HPV infection and cervical cancer is a rare outcome.

You will be referred to a specialist for a follow-up test, known as a colposcopy test (see “What is colposcopy” for more information).

It is very important you follow the instructions of your healthcare provider if you received this test result.

An unsatisfactory test result

An unsatisfactory test result does not mean there is something wrong. An unsatisfactory result means your sample cannot be read properly and it is important to repeat the test in six weeks.

An unsatisfactory test result happens when your sample cannot be read properly by the laboratory. There are many reasons why this happens; for example, the number of cells collected was too small.

Abnormalities can usually be treated easily and successfully if detected early. If untreated there is a greater chance of developing cervical cancer.

Cervical Screening aims to prevent cervical cancer. Talk to your healthcare provider if you are anxious or worried about your result.



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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE REFERRED TO A SPECIALIST?

Depending on your result, your healthcare provider may refer you to a specialist for further investigations. The following information explains some of these procedures and treatments.

What is a Colposcopy?

A colposcopy is an examination of your cervix. During this examination, the specialist will use a device called a colposcope, which looks like a pair of binoculars on a stand; providing a magnified view of your cervix. A colposcopy is done by a specialist, usually a gynaecologist. Your healthcare provider can help you decide who to see for the colposcopy.

How is a colposcopy test done?

When you arrive for the appointment, it is fine to ask as many questions about the test as you like. Ask the specialist to explain what they are doing throughout the examination if that will help you.

To have a colposcopy test, you will be asked to lie on an examination bed with your legs supported, in a similar position to when you have a Cervical Screening Test. Like the Cervical Screening Test, the specialist will insert a speculum into your vagina. The specialist will then put a special liquid onto your cervix to highlight any abnormal areas.

The specialist will then look through the colposcope to carefully examine your cervix. The colposcope itself does not enter the body.

This examination usually takes 10 – 15 minutes and most people do not experience any pain. However, you may have some discomfort from having the speculum inside your vagina.

Ask your specialist to explain what it means if something is found during the examination.

What is a Biopsy?

If areas of your cervix appear abnormal during the colposcopy, a small sample of tissue (a biopsy) may be taken from any abnormal looking areas of the cervix. This sample will be sent to a laboratory for testing.

It may take up to two weeks for the results of your biopsy to come back to your healthcare provider. You should make an appointment with your healthcare provider to discuss the results and talk about treatment (if needed).

If you have a biopsy, you may have some pain for a short time. Avoid rigorous exercise for 24 hours after a biopsy and it is best to avoid sexual intercourse for one to two days. You can shower, however avoid swimming, bathing and spas for one to two days.

These precautions reduce your risk of bleeding and/or infection. You may have some discharge and 'spotting' for a few hours afterwards, so it is a good idea to take a thin sanitary pad or panty liner to the appointment.

Treatment for Abnormalities

If an abnormality is found during your colposcopy, further treatment may be required. Your healthcare provider will talk to you about what treatment options are most appropriate for your personal circumstances.

Treatment options may include wire loop excision, laser or cone biopsy. The following sections provide a short explanation of each of these treatment options.

Wire loop excision

During this procedure, the abnormal cells are removed from your cervix with a wire loop. The procedure takes 15 – 30 minutes. Most women have the procedure with a local anaesthetic, however some need a general anaesthetic. If a general anaesthetic is advised or preferred, a one-day hospital stay may be necessary.

Laser

Laser treatment removes the abnormal cells using heat from a laser beam. The procedure takes 15 – 30 minutes. Most women have the procedure with a local anaesthetic, however some need a general anaesthetic. Like the wire loop procedure, if a general anaesthetic is advised or preferred, a one-day hospital stay may be necessary.

Cone Biopsy

In this minor operation, a cone-shaped section of the cervix which contains the abnormal cells is removed. A general anaesthetic is normally needed and a day or overnight hospital stay for recovery may also be required.

This operation is recommended when the abnormal cells are higher in the cervical canal and/or affect the glandular cells. Glandular cells appear higher up in the cervical canal.

Note: After any form of treatment for abnormalities you should not swim, use tampons or have vaginal intercourse for three to four weeks until the cervix has healed. Strenuous exercise should be avoided for seven to ten days as this increases the risk of bleeding and infection.

It is very important that you follow the instructions of your healthcare provider.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Will treatment affect my chances of becoming pregnant?

Some types of treatment such as a cone biopsy or wire loop excision may weaken the cervix. While it is still possible to become pregnant, a stitch may need to be inserted into the cervix to strengthen it and reduce the risk of miscarriage. It is important to notify your healthcare provider of any treatment you have had to your cervix in the past.

How did I get the HPV?

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is spread by genital-skin to skin contact during sexual activity. You can be exposed to HPV the first time you have sexual activity, and from only one sexual partner.

Most people will have the HPV infection at some point in their lives but the body usually clears the virus. The virus is so common it could be considered a normal part of being sexually active.

Condoms may provide some protection from HPV, but condoms do not cover all the genital skin. The time from HPV infection to cervical cancer is usually 10 – 15 years.

Can Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) people also get the virus?

Yes, anyone who engages in genital-skin to skin contact with a person of any gender can be infected with HPV.

Do I need to avoid having sex if I have HPV?

There is no reason to stop having sex if your Cervical Screening Test shows HPV.

The HPV virus is very common and there is no way of knowing if your partner currently has, or has had, this type of virus as most of the time the body is able to clear the virus without the virus causing any problems.

Should I tell my partner I have HPV?

Because the virus can be hidden for a long time, having HPV does not necessarily mean that you or your partner has been unfaithful. HPV can remain inactive for a long time. For most people it is impossible to know when or from whom they were infected with HPV.

HPV also can cause genital warts and other cancers such as anal, vaginal, oropharyngeal (throat), vulva and penile. If you have HPV, you may choose to discuss this with your partner. Talking with your partner about your Cervical Screening Test results is completely your decision.

If you are worried about passing HPV onto your partner, talk to your healthcare provider for further advice.

How is HPV treated?

There is no treatment for HPV. In most cases the immune system clears HPV from the body naturally over time and has no long-lasting effects. Most people with HPV have no symptoms and will never know they have it. Cervical cell changes caused by HPV and found by a Cervical Screening Test should be followed up by further testing, and be treated if necessary.

Genital warts caused by some types of HPV can be treated by a healthcare provider.

Can I be reinfected with HPV?

There are different types of HPV virus. Once you have been exposed to one type of HPV, you are unlikely to be infected again with the same virus, as the body usually becomes immune to that type. However, the virus may remain inactive in your body and many years later may become active again.

So even if you are no longer sexually active, or only have one sexual partner, you should continue screening.

I have had the HPV Vaccine. Can I still get the HPV Infection?

Yes. Even if you have had the HPV vaccine you should have regular Cervical Screening Tests. There are many types of HPV and the HPV vaccine does not protect you against all of them. You may have already been exposed to HPV through sexual activity before you had the vaccine. The HPV vaccine does not protect against HPV infections you have already been exposed to.

Should I have the HPV vaccine?

The HPV vaccine works best if it is given before exposure to HPV, before you are sexually active. If you have already been exposed to HPV, the benefits of the vaccine may be reduced.

In Australia the HPV vaccine is given to adolescents through the school-based immunisation program and is approved for use in females aged 9 – 45 and in males aged 9 – 26. Talk to your healthcare provider about the individual benefits to you. The vaccine can be purchased outside of the funded school program; you might be charged extra consultation fees by your healthcare provider. Three doses of the vaccine are currently recommended.

The vaccine is safe and protects against the two HPV types (types 16 and 18) that cause around 70 per cent of cervical cancers, as well as some anal, vaginal, oropharyngeal, vulva and penile cancers. It also protects against two non-cancer causing HPV types that cause up to 90 per cent of genital warts.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

If English is not your first language, and you need help please call the Translating and Interpreting Service on **13 14 50**. It will cost the same as a local phone call.

NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAM

If you would like to find out more about cervical screening and understand how the program works in Australia, please go to the National Cervical Screening Program website or call **13 15 56**.

www.cancerscreening.gov.au/cervical

NATIONAL CANCER SCREENING REGISTER

If you would like to update your contact details and look up when your next Cervical Screening Test is due, please call **1800 627 701**.

The National Cervical Screening Program is a joint Australian, State and Territory Government Program.

NATIONAL HPV VACCINATION REGISTER

If you need to check if you've already had the HPV vaccine, including how many doses you have received, please go to the National HPV Vaccination Register website or call 1800 478 734.

www.hpvregister.org.au