NHS

Cervical Screening

Your smear test

the cancer research campaign
You have been invited to have a cervical smear test. You are being asked to come now either because you have never been tested or because it is time you had another test.

Why do I need a cervical smear test?
Cancer of the cervix can be prevented. The signs that it may develop can be spotted in advance, and it can be stopped before it even gets started.

Yet, around 1500 women in the UK die from cervical cancer every year. Most of these have never had a smear test, the simple, quick and painless test that might have saved their lives.

Should all women have the test?
All women aged 20 to 64 are now offered a cervical smear test by the NHS.

This test is for all women, although cervical cancer is much less common in women who have never had sex.

If you have passed the menopause, you still need to be tested to check that the cervix is healthy. If you have had a hysterectomy, are over 65, or if you have other doubts about whether you still need to be tested, your doctor will advise you.

What is the cervical smear test?
It is a test to check the health of the cervix. For most women it shows that the cells of the cervix are normal and healthy.

For a few women it picks up abnormal changes in the cervix at a very early stage before any cancer is present. The abnormal changes are known as dyskaryosis and act as early warning signals that, over time, cervical cancer may develop if left untreated.

As with other medical tests, cervical screening is not 100 per cent perfect. If you have any problems between smear tests, such as bleeding after intercourse, you should consult your GP.

What is the cervix?
The lower part of the womb – often called the neck of the womb.

Does the test hurt?
There is no pain. If you feel tense you might experience some discomfort – try to relax by taking slow, deep breaths.

Where can I have my smear test?
You can choose whether you have your smear test at your GP surgery or family planning clinic.

Who will carry out my smear test?
A qualified doctor or nurse will carry out the test.

Will the doctor or nurse be female?
If you would prefer a female, ask when you make your appointment.

Will I have to undress?
You will be asked to undress from the waist down, but if you wear a full skirt this will not have to be removed.

What exactly happens during the test?
You will be asked to lie down on a couch. The doctor or nurse will then gently insert a small instrument called a speculum into your vagina to hold it open. Then, a smooth wooden or plastic spatula will be lightly wiped over the cervix to pick up a few of the cells. These cells will be sent away to be examined under a microscope. The test itself takes just a few minutes.

Is there anything I should do in advance?
You cannot be tested while you are menstruating, so be sure to get your appointment before or after your period is due.
**What about sex before the test?**

If you use a spermicide, a barrier method of contraception, or a lubricant jelly you should avoid sex for 24 hours before the test, as the chemicals they contain may affect the smear.

**When do I get the results?**

When you have the test you will be told how, where and approximately when you will get the results. Before you leave the surgery or clinic make sure that you have been given this information.

**What does it mean if I'm called back?**

Only very rarely does it mean that you have cancer. It might simply mean that your sample didn't show up clearly, and that another smear is needed. This is called an **unsatisfactory result**.

On the other hand, your result could point to some slight changes in the cells of the cervix. If abnormal changes, known as dyskaryosis, are detected, you will have what is called an **abnormal result**.

**Can anything be done about abnormal changes?**

Yes, your doctor will explain what needs to be done. You may be asked to come back for more smear tests. Often the cells return to normal by themselves, but if the repeat smear test still shows abnormal cells, you may be asked to go to a hospital for a closer examination. Treatment, if needed, is virtually 100 per cent effective. It is a minor procedure usually done on an out-patient basis.

**How often should I be tested?**

At least once every five years between the ages of 20 and 64.

This policy has been recommended by medical professionals who have studied how cervical cancer develops and have decided that the best safeguard is to be tested at least once every five years.

Regular smear tests are important. They pick up the early warning signals that could save your life.