Girls aged 12–13 are offered a free vaccination to protect against cervical cancer. Three injections are given by a nurse at school over six months. There has also been a ‘catch up’ programme to vaccinate older teenage girls. The vaccine could prevent at least seven out of 10 cervical cancer cases. But it does not protect against all types of HPV, so it is still important to go for cervical screening.

What should I look out for?
If you notice any of the signs and symptoms described in this leaflet make sure you see your doctor.

Look out for:
• bleeding between periods
• bleeding during or after sex
• bleeding after the menopause
• any unpleasant vaginal discharge
• discomfort or pain during sex.

These may be signs of other common conditions. They do not necessarily mean you have cancer. But it is best to get them checked out.

HPV vaccination
Further information
For more about screening and the signs and symptoms of cancer visit spotcancerearly.com
For more about cancer visit our patient information website cruk.org/cancer-help
If you want to talk in confidence about cancer, call our information nurses on freephone 0808 800 4040.

Our health messages are based on scientific evidence. Find out more at cruk.org/health
All our leaflets are thoroughly researched and based on the most up-to-date scientific evidence. They are reviewed by independent experts and updated regularly. You can order our full range of leaflets free online at cruk.org/leaflets

About Cancer Research UK
CRUK pioneers life-saving research to bring forward the day when all cancers are cured. From our volunteers and supporters to our scientists, doctors and nurses, we’re all here to save more lives and prevent, control and cure all cancers. If you would like to support our work, please call 0300 123 1861 or visit our website cruk.org
How common is it?
Because of the national screening programme, the number of new cases of cervical cancer is falling.
There are around 2,800 new cases of cervical cancer in the UK every year. It is the most common cancer in women under the age of 35. But cervical cancer 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.

Cervical screening checks the health of the cervix.

Why is cervical screening so important?
Cervical screening saves around 5,000 lives every year in the UK. It helps doctors find changes in the cervix early, before they have a chance to develop into cancer. Treating early changes can prevent cervical cancer from developing.

Who can go for cervical screening?
Local health services across the UK invite women for free cervical screening tests at their local doctor’s surgery or clinic.

Women who are registered with a doctor are invited for cervical screening every three to five years, from their early to mid 20s to their early 60s. It is important to go for your cervical screening test whenever you are invited.

If you are not registered with a doctor, call NHS Direct on 0845 4647.

What is the cervical screening test?
The test, which many people know as the ‘smear 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 small brush. These cells are then put in a small pot of liquid and sent to a laboratory to be looked at carefully under a microscope.

In the past, cells were taken using a spatula and then smeared onto a glass slide. This was called the smear test.

Ovaries

Uterus

Cervix

Vagina

Cervical cancer facts
Most cases of cervical cancer could be prevented. Thanks to cervical screening (which many people know as the ‘smear test’), doctors can find and treat early changes in the cervix before they develop into cancer.

In this leaflet you can find out about:
• the cervix
• why it is so important to go for cervical screening
• what will happen at your cervical screening test
• symptoms of cervical cancer
• what affects your risk of cervical cancer.

What happens after the test?
Most women have normal results.
Sometimes a sample is not clear enough and you may need to have another test. If you have an abnormal result this does not mean you have cancer. It means that some of the cells in your test may have undergone changes and may need to be treated. If you have an abnormal result your doctor will talk to you about having further tests.

Like other screening tests, cervical screening is not perfect. There is a small chance that abnormal cells might be missed, or that the results incorrectly show abnormal cells or cell changes that need to be treated. This can mean cells that would not have developed into cancer could be treated.

But most experts agree that the benefits of cervical screening outweigh these difficulties.

What affects your risk?
HPV
Nearly all cases of cervical cancer are linked to a common sexually transmitted infection called human papillomavirus or HPV.

Sexual history
Women who first had sex at a young age or have had several sexual partners have a higher risk of developing cervical cancer. This is because they are more likely to get HPV infection. But HPV is a very common infection which can affect anyone who has ever been sexually active.

Condoms protect against many sexually transmitted infections. And they can reduce your chances of getting or spreading HPV infection.