



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála  
National Screening Service

10 December 2020

Deputy David Cullinane  
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Our Ref: HM/Communications

**PQ39379/20: To ask the Minister for Health if he will advise on a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter.**

**Details supplied:** Could you highlight the fact that the CervicalCheck procedure is after changing? Previously your cells would be tested to see if there were any abnormalities and you were then given a HPV test if there was cell abnormalities. This week I just discovered that the HPV test is completed first and they will only go on to check your cells if you test positive for this. This is quite concerning as at my last smear test I was diagnosed with cin3 (high level pre cancerous cells) and had to undergo a lletz procedure. At the time I was also tested for hpv which was negative. If the cervical check at the time followed the new rules I would have tested negative for the hpv and therefore they would not have tested my cells leaving the cin3 cells to continue to grow or multiply. I just think it's shocking that after the recent CervicalCheck scandal that they can do this and leave so many women at risk of developing cancer.

Dear Deputy Cullinane,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

On March 30, 2020 CervicalCheck introduced the HPV test as the primary screening method for the detection of abnormal cervical cells which could develop into cervical cancer. This policy change was recommended in a report by HIQA in 2017 and was made after approval by the Department of Health. This brings the Irish cervical screening programme in line with international best practice in cervical screening.

Screening tests are designed to detect individuals at risk and are not diagnostic tests. With HPV screening we are testing for a risk factor in the development of cervical cancer: the presence of the human papillomavirus (HPV).

Most people at some time will have an HPV infection, but most do not get abnormal cells. In the majority of people who do develop abnormal cells, those cells return to normal without treatment. The purpose of screening is to detect the small number of people whose bodies do not clear the virus and need treatment to remove an abnormality.

Under HPV cervical screening, if your sample tests positive for HPV, it is also tested for cell changes. If you do not have high-risk HPV your sample will not be looked at for cell changes. This is because it is likely that you will not develop cancer without having high risk HPV.

We know that HPV screening is better at predicting that your cervix is normal, than a screening test looking at the cells (smear test).

If 1,000 people are screened, about 20 people will have abnormal (pre-cancerous) cervical cells:

- 15 of these 20 people will have these cells found through the old smear test - 5 people will not and may go on to develop cervical cancer

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BreastCheck  
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Cúc  
The National Breast Screening Programme



CervicalCheck  
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THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME



BowelScreen  
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Putóige  
The National Bowel Screening Programme



Diabetic RetinaScreen  
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Scrínn de Dhráibéigh  
The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme



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- 18 of these 20 people will have these cells found through new HPV cervical screening - 2 people will not and may go on to develop cervical cancer.

The HPV test is a more sensitive and accurate test than the old smear test. Therefore it is not envisioned that cytology (smear tests) will be offered by the programme when women are found to be HPV negative.

The HSE cannot comment on individual cases. Maintaining a patient's confidentiality is not only an ethical requirement for the HSE, it is also a legal requirement as defined in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) along with the Data Protection Acts 1988-2018. When a patient or family makes personal information public, this does not relieve the HSE of its duty to preserve client confidentiality at all times.

Screening is a population health measure and on a population basis, the HPV screening test is a more accurate test of the risk factor for the development of cancer. However, no screening test will detect or prevent all abnormal cell changes or cancers.

The CervicalCheck website has been updated with information on the new test since March 30, 2020 and all participants who are invited or recalled for screening receive a detailed information leaflet outline the new test, its benefits and limitations. GP and practice nurses throughout the country have attended information sessions where they have received guidance on explaining the new test to their patients when they come for screening.

A targeted advertising campaign to raise awareness of the new HPV cervical screening test has been live since CervicalCheck restarted in July 2020. The campaign includes:

- social media content and advertising
- online content advertising
- digital display adverts
- production of eight-part modular animated video, as well as real-life videos and stills in different formats.

We are also working with stakeholders and partners, including GPs, to promote messaging about the new HPV cervical screening test, through their networks. The advertising campaign will continue and expand in the New Year.

The NSS continues to encourage all people who are between screening appointments, or waiting for rescheduled appointments, to be aware of, and act upon, any symptoms associated with the conditions for which they are being screened. We ask that those people contact their GP, who will arrange appropriate follow-up care. For other queries please call the Freephone information line on 1800 45 45 55, email [info@cervicalcheck.ie](mailto:info@cervicalcheck.ie) or contact your clinic directly.

I trust this information is of assistance to you, but should you have any further queries please contact me.

Fiona Murphy  
Chief Executive, National Screening Service

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