

10 January 2022

Deputy Colm Burke
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ61699/21: To ask the Minister for Health if he will provide details of the efficacy of the new cervical cancer test that detects HPV; the number of tests that have been HPV positive with no abnormal cell changes; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

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

HPV is a common viral infection usually spread by skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. It is rare for precancerous cells to persist or progress in the absence of 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.

Before March 2020, CervicalCheck used cytology screening, where the cells of the cervix (in the sample) were looked at under a microscope. This was a good test used internationally and reduced incidence and mortality from cervical cancer.

However, in March 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 the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) in 2017, and was approved by the Department of Health.

This brought the Irish cervical screening programme into line with international best practice in cervical screening.

HPV is a better test than cytology for identifying people at risk of having high-grade changes in the cells of the cervix. Under HPV cervical screening, if a sample tests positive for HPV, it is also tested for cell changes. If a person does not have HPV, their sample will not be looked at for cell changes. This is because it is unlikely that they will develop cervical cancer in the absence of HPV.

The HPV test is a more sensitive and accurate test than the cytology test. If 1,000 people are screened, about 20 people will have abnormal (pre-cancerous) cervical cells:

- Around 15 of these 20 people will have these cells found through a cytology test. Five people will not and may go on to develop cervical cancer.
- Around 18 of these 20 people will have these cells found through HPV cervical screening. Two people will not and may go on to develop cervical cancer.

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An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

CervicalCheck data from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 show there were 179,538 valid screening tests taken. Of these, 14.7% (26,463) showed the presence of HPV. Of the HPV positive tests, 13,694 (52%) had no abnormal cell changes detected using cytology.

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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National Screening Service



BreastCheck
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Cúis
The National Breast Screening Programme



CervicalCheck
AN CLÁR NÁISIÚNTA SCAOTHÁSTÁLA CEIRBEACS
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME



BowelScreen
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Públige
The National Bowel Screening Programme



Diabetic
RetinaScreen
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Néitire do Chéiméigh
The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme