



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

25 March 2021

Deputy David Cullinane
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Our Ref: EG/Communications

PQ15189/21: To ask the Minister for Health if he will address a matter raised in Correspondence (details supplied); the CervicalCheck screening process in this context; if HPV negative patients are examined or tested for abnormal cells; if not, the reason for this Practice and the change in practice; and if he will make a statement on the matter

Details supplied: In 2018 I received a call that my smear had come back abnormal. I had 3 precancerous cells, had my treatment, and was HPV negative. I am one of thousands of Irish women HPV negative that had precancerous cells. To now learn that CervicalCheck is now only testing for HPV and not testing any women that are HPV negative for abnormal cells is completely crazy.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

The HSE cannot comment on individual cases as to do so would breach our duty of confidentiality to the individuals concerned. Maintaining 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.

CervicalCheck screening process in 2018

While we cannot answer an individual's specific queries about their screening history without their personal details, the procedure for anyone who had a cervical screening test (the old smear test) prior to 30 March 2020 was as follows:

- Women whose sample showed a mildly abnormal smear test result also had a HPV test to clarify whether further investigation was needed. If the test came back positive, an appointment was made for further investigation at colposcopy.
- Women who had a normal cytology (smear) tests result had no action required.
- Women whose tests showed high grade cell changes (CIN 2&3) were sent straight to colposcopy **without HPV testing**. After treatment this group of women received HPV testing as a 'test of cure'. If no HPV was found they were said to be 'cured'.
- If the post-treatment test was negative it did NOT mean they were HPV negative at the time of pre-treatment testing. It meant that by the time they were tested, their body had cleared the HPV infection.

Introduction of HPV testing

Screening is the process of identifying healthy people who may have an increased chance of having a disease or condition, enabling effective treatment.

On 30 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 HIQA in 2017 and was made after approval by the Department of Health.

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An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Coik
The National Breast Screening Programme



AN CLÁR NAISIÚNTA SCAETHÁSTÁLA CEIRBEACS
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME



An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Putóige
The National Bowel Screening Programme



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



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

HPV is a common viral infection usually spread by skin to skin contact during sexual activity. Any person who has ever engaged in sexual activity is likely to have been exposed to HPV.

It is rare for precancerous cells to persist or progress in the absence of HPV. From what we now know about the HPV virus and the development of high grade cell changes, we can now say that the women who had treatment, before 30 March 2020, for high grade cell changes were almost all HPV positive at time of their smear test, but they were not routinely tested for HPV before treatment. Following on from this, if a patient is HPV negative post treatment, it is very unlikely that she will go on to develop further significant abnormal cells. We now know that it is the combination of abnormal cells plus HPV that puts women at risk of cervical cancer. If an individual woman has abnormal cells without evidence of HPV, it is likely that these abnormal cells will return to normal without intervention. Treating abnormal cells on the cervix is not risk-free - women who have two or more LLETZ treatments are at a significant increased risk of preterm birth. It is important that only significant cell changes are treated.

Cervical screening aims to prevent the most common form of cervical cancer – squamous cell cancer – and 99% of those cancers are caused by HPV. However, there is a group of other cancers that are not squamous cancer. Over 85% of this second group of cancers are also caused by HPV, and around 15% aren't. These cancers were difficult to detect with cytology (smear test) and are also difficult to detect with HPV. However, more of these cancers will be picked up with HPV screening than with cytology. There is no cervical cancer screening test available that prevents all cervical cancers.

For the few patients who are truly HPV negative with a cancer – there is no known screening test available that we can use, which is why we advocate the investigation of clinical symptoms in general gynecology even if a previous screening test has been negative.

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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