



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

24 February 2022

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan
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Our Ref: HM/Communications

PQ8423/22 To ask the Minister for Health if cervical health checks will be repeated every two years in order to ensure best opportunities for early diagnosis; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

Transition to HPV cervical screening

Ireland's CervicalCheck programme made the transition to HPV cervical screening on 30 March 2020. The move to HPV cervical screening has been informed by a 2017 Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) Health Technology Assessment [report](#) that focused on the human papillomavirus (HPV) - a virus which can cause cell changes that can lead to cancer.

The report concluded that HPV cervical screening within the recommended age range, together with a HPV vaccination programme, was the recommended strategy for the reduction in the incidence of cervical cancer and the prevalence of abnormal cells. This type of cervical screening has been introduced, to date, in Australia, England, Scotland, the Netherlands and Wales.

A cervical screening test checks the health of your cervix. Screening first looks to see if you have any of the high-risk types of human papillomavirus (HPV) that cause cervical cancer. It's not a test for cancer; it's a test to help prevent cancer from developing. If HPV is found, your same test sample will be checked to see if you have any abnormal (pre-cancerous) cells in your cervix.

Screening is not a diagnostic test, therefore people cannot be diagnosed or misdiagnosed during screening. Screening is an assessment of your risk of a condition developing. If you are assessed to be at high risk, you are put forward for further tests which may lead to diagnosis. These further tests occur in colposcopy clinics.

Frequency of screening

CervicalCheck offers free cervical screening to almost 1.3 million eligible women living in Ireland aged 25 to 65.

If a person is aged 25 to 29 they will usually have a cervical screening test every 3 years.

People aged 25 to 29 are screened more often. This is in line with international guidelines, although some countries do not start screening until age 30 years. The guidance is based on over 20 years of studies of HPV testing, first as part of diagnosing cervical cell changes and then as a screening test.

Regular cervical screening is one of the best ways to prevent cervical cancer from developing. It provides us with a 'picture' of the cervix that allows us to monitor any changes over time and identify people who may be at risk of developing abnormal cells. However, women aged 25 to

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30 are new to the programme and coming for their first test aged 25. They have no screening history so screening these women every three years means we can build up a picture of their cervix at an early stage.

Statistics tell us that women usually become sexually active in their late teens / early 20s, when they are also more likely also to have multiple partners. This means that statistically, women in this age bracket are more susceptible to getting an HPV virus. We test this age group for the presence of the virus more often, to give us more opportunities to pick up an HPV virus

If a person is aged 30 to 65 they will usually have a cervical screening test every 5 years.

This change to how often people are screened is because we have moved to a better screening test, HPV cervical screening. It is safe to wait for 5 years between tests if people do not have a HPV infection. This is because the risk of developing cell changes is very low and if a test showing that they do not have HPV is more reliable than a test finding normal cells due to the higher sensitivity and specificity of the HPV test. In most cases, it takes 10 to 15 years for a HPV infection to develop into cervical cancer. Cervical cancer is a rare outcome of a HPV infection.

Cervical screening

In cervical screening, women are called at different intervals depending on their age and level of risk. It is important that all screening programmes balance these benefits and risks.

Cervical screening is one of the best ways to protect yourself from cervical cancer. Regular cervical screening saves lives; can find HPV before it causes abnormal cells in the cervix; can find abnormal cell changes before symptoms develop; and can find abnormal cell changes when they are easier to treat. Finding HPV and abnormal cells early is the best way to prevent cervical cancer developing. This is why having regular screening tests is important.

The main limitations of cervical screening are that: it will not prevent all cases of cervical cancer; some people will still develop cervical cancer despite regular screening; some abnormal cell changes may be missed; and it will not find every abnormal cell change.

If cervical cancer is found early, it is easier to treat and people have a high chance of a good recovery. Regrettably, not all cancers are detected by cervical screening but the introduction of screening has, nonetheless, contributed to the reduction of deaths from cervical cancer in countries where such programmes operate, including Ireland.

Population-based cervical screening is most effective among people with a cervix aged 25 - 65 years. Since CervicalCheck started in 2008, the number of women who developed cervical cancer has fallen by 7% year-on-year between 2010-2015 (National Cancer Registry of Ireland latest figures). In the absence of screening, cervical cancer may not have been detected in these people until they developed physical signs or symptoms of more advanced disease.

CervicalCheck media guide

CervicalCheck have created a [media guide](#), the first in a series of National Screening Service information guidelines we are producing for politicians, journalists, broadcasters, commentators, bloggers, academics and all those producing news and commentary on screening in Ireland.

Cervical screening in Ireland is a complex subject, so it is important to have as much factual



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information as possible. It includes the following information on the screening programme:

- Background and history
- The tests we use
- Screening's role in reducing the incidence of cervical cancer in Ireland
- Key facts and terms used.

We hope our guidelines will help inform accurate wider public discussion on cervical screening.

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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