



# Important information about your free cervical screening

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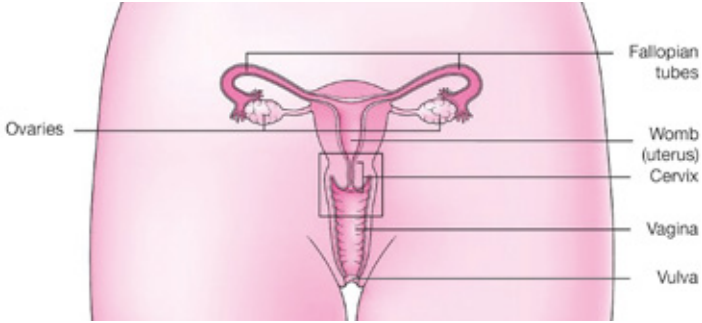
An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála  
National Screening Service

**CervicalCheck**  
AN CLÁR NÁISIÚNTA SCAGTHÁSTÁLA CEIRBHEACS  
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME



# What is cervical cancer?

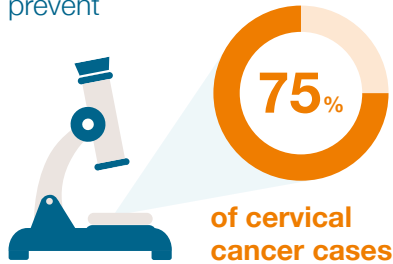
Cervical cancer is a cancer of the cervix (neck of the womb). Cells of the cervix can become abnormal and change slowly over many years to become a cancer.



# What is cervical screening?

A cervical screening test (smear test) is a way of detecting abnormal cells in the cervix. If not detected, these abnormal cells could develop into cervical cancer. So removing them can prevent cervical cancer.

It is estimated that regular **cervical screening** can prevent



A screening test is not a diagnostic test. Like all screening tests, it is carried out on people who seem to be healthy. They don't have symptoms.

Screening looks to see if there are any abnormal cells so they can be removed to prevent cervical cancer developing.

Cervical screening does not detect changes in the womb, fallopian tubes, ovaries or vagina.

## Who should have cervical screening?

If you are aged between 25 and 60 and have ever been sexually active, you should have regular free cervical screening tests. This includes women in same-sex relationships.

If you have had a hysterectomy or you are not sure if you need cervical screening tests, contact your GP (doctor) to find out.

## How do I arrange a cervical screening test?

Make an appointment directly with any doctor or nurse registered with CervicalCheck. You can find out when your next cervical screening test is due and see a list of registered doctors and nurses on [hse.ie/cervicalcheck](https://www.hse.ie/cervicalcheck) or by calling Freephone **1800 45 45 55** or emailing [info@cervicalcheck.ie](mailto:info@cervicalcheck.ie)

- It is best to have a cervical screening test when you are not having your period.

## How often should I have cervical screening?

Depending on your age, you should have a test:

- every 3 years if you are aged between 25 to 44 years
- every 5 years if you are aged 45 to 60 years

Some women may need more frequent screening. We will let you know if you do.

## What are the benefits of cervical screening?

Regular cervical screening:

- saves lives
- can detect changes in the cells of the cervix when they are easier to treat
- helps detect changes before symptoms develop

Detecting abnormal cells early is the best way to prevent cervical cancer. This is why having regular screening tests is important.

Since CervicalCheck started in 2008:

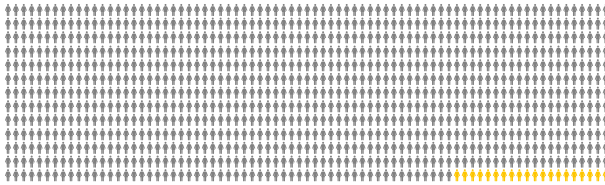
- more than 3 million screening tests have been carried out
- the number of women who develop cervical cancer has fallen
- over 100,000 cases of abnormal cervical cells have been detected, many of which could have developed into cancer if not detected through screening and treated where necessary

## What are the limitations of cervical screening?

The main limitations of screening are:

- Cervical screening will not prevent all cases of cervical cancer
- Some women will still develop cervical cancer despite regular screening
- Some abnormal cell changes may be missed

For every 1000 women screened, about **20 women** will have abnormal cervical cells



About **15 out of these 20** women **will have** these cells detected through screening



About **5 out of these 20** women **will not have** these cells detected through screening and may develop cervical cancer



## Why are some abnormalities missed?

Abnormalities will sometimes be missed because:

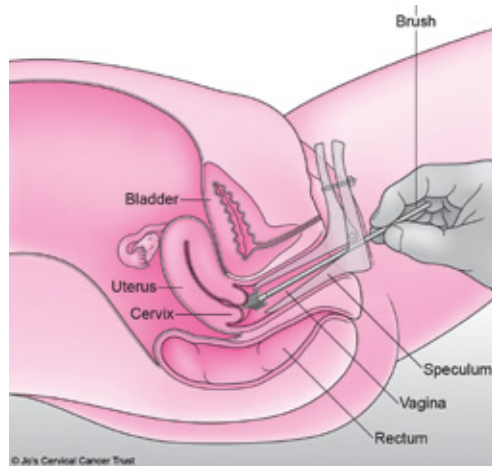
- the sample was taken from an area where there were no abnormal cells
- abnormal cells can look quite similar to normal cells and the difference can be subtle, or
- the cells could not be seen clearly enough

Fortunately, cervical cancer takes many years to develop so abnormal cells missed on one screening test can be detected on the next one. This is why you should always attend your cervical screening test when it is due.

## How is a cervical screening test done?

The screening test usually takes about 5 minutes.

1. You will be asked to undress from the waist down and lie on a couch.
2. You can lie on your side or your back, whichever is more comfortable for you.
3. The doctor or nurse will gently put an instrument called a speculum into your vagina. This holds the walls of the vagina open so the cervix can be seen.
4. A small soft brush will be used to gently collect a sample of cells from the cervix.



Some women find the procedure slightly uncomfortable or embarrassing, but for most women it's not painful. If you find the test painful, tell the doctor or nurse as they may be able to reduce your discomfort.

## What happens to my sample?

Your sample goes to a quality-assured laboratory. In the lab, two experts (scientists) examine your sample for cell changes. If they find low-grade changes, they will also test your sample for certain types of HPV infection. This will help to inform your doctor or nurse what type of follow-up you may need.

## How will I find out about my test results?

Your test results will be sent to your doctor or clinic. We will also write you a letter to let you know your test results are available. The letter we send you will recommend what you should do next.

## What do my test results mean?

Your test results will be either normal or abnormal. Most test results are normal. If your result is abnormal, it does not mean you have cervical cancer. We may recommend that you go for a colposcopy – a detailed exam of your cervix (neck of womb) – in an outpatient clinic.

## False positives and negatives

Sometimes test results are inaccurate. We call these results 'false positives' and 'false negatives'. False positives and false negatives are unavoidable. They happen in every screening programme.

### False positive results

A result may be reported as positive (abnormal cells), even though there are no changes to cells of the cervix. A 'false positive' may mean you will have further investigations that ultimately confirms there was no risk of cancer at that time.

### False negative results

A result may be reported as negative (normal), even though there are abnormal cells in the cervix. A 'false negative' may mean that you do not have further investigations when there may have been a risk of cancer at that time.

Therefore, even if your test result is normal, you may still be at risk of developing cervical cancer in the future. Because of this, it is important that you attend for cervical screening each time you are due and always pay attention to possible symptoms. See section 'Symptoms of cervical cancer' for more information.

## What is a colposcopy?

A colposcopy is a detailed examination of the cervix. It is free as part of the CervicalCheck Screening Programme and is carried out by a doctor or nurse in a public hospital out-patient clinic. It usually takes about 20 minutes.

If you need a colposcopy, the doctor or nurse who took your screening test will give you more information and refer you to a colposcopy clinic of your choice. There is a list of these clinics on [hse.ie/cervicalcheck](https://www.hse.ie/cervicalcheck)

You can also decide to attend as a private patient but you will have to pay a fee. If you choose to have a colposcopy as a private patient, we will be unable to access your results and information. We only have access to results and recommendations for tests taken with CervicalCheck.

## What is HPV?

Abnormal cell changes are caused by certain types of human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is a very common virus. Most will have had it at some time in their lives. It is spread by skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity.

If you have never had sex, your chance of having HPV is low. This does not mean there is no risk of developing cervical cancer.

If you have ever engaged in sexual activity, you were probably exposed to HPV. Fortunately, almost all of these infections will have been cleared by the immune system without the person even knowing they had HPV.



## HPV Vaccine

The free HPV vaccine given to schoolgirls can protect against two of the high-risk types of HPV. But, if you have had the vaccine, you will still need to have regular cervical screening (smear tests). This is because the vaccine does not protect against all high-risk types of HPV.

See **www.hpv.ie** for more information.

## Giving your consent

Each time you have a cervical screening test we will ask you to sign a consent form called a 'Cervical Screening Form' before the test. If you cannot sign the form, you will be asked to give your consent either verbally or by making a mark on the form in front of a doctor or nurse.

This is to confirm that you:

- have been told about cervical screening and its benefits and limitations
- understand this information
- have checked that your name, address and other details are correct - this is to make sure we have your current address to communicate with you
- allow us to receive, hold and exchange your personal information and screening history with those who deliver the programme

**Remember:** Only you can give your consent to be part of our programme.

You have to consent before you have your screening test.

You can withdraw your consent at any time by contacting us on Freephone **1800 45 45 55** or emailing **info@cervicalcheck.ie**

## How we use your personal information

CervicalCheck takes and stores your personal information (name, address, phone number, date of birth, PPSN) and cervical screening history. Your cervical screening history relates to your participation in CervicalCheck. It can include smear and HPV test results, colposcopy and attendances, treatments and biopsy (test sample) results.

We will use your information to contact you when your next screening test is due or when your results are available. We also exchange your information with the other health services that deliver the programme.

This includes the doctor or nurse who takes your screening test, the laboratory, colposcopy clinics and the National Cancer Registry Ireland. This is to make sure we have an accurate record of your screening history.

We may use your screening test sample in teaching, in reviews and audits and to check the quality and effectiveness of the programme. We may also use your information to invite you to take part in research.

It is your choice to take part or not. We will never use your name in any reports, when teaching or in reviews or audits. We will keep your personal information safe and confidential in line with current data protection regulations.

You will have full and open access to your personal information held by CervicalCheck upon request. It is important that you let CervicalCheck know if your details change. To find out how to access your records, see [hse.ie/cervicalcheck](https://hse.ie/cervicalcheck)

## Communicating with you

We will communicate with you in an open, honest, timely and transparent manner if:

- something goes wrong with your care
- you experience harm as a result of your care
- we think that harm may have occurred

This means that we will keep you fully informed of the facts and details related to your participation in the Cervical Screening Programme.

## How can I reduce my risk of getting cervical cancer?

You can reduce your risk of cervical cancer by:

- having regular smear tests
- talking to your doctor about any concerns or symptoms

## Symptoms of cervical cancer

Outside of your regular screening tests please be aware of symptoms that might mean you have cervical cancer. Contact your doctor if you have any concerns.

Symptoms to look out for:

- a pain in your pelvis (anywhere between your bellybutton and the top of your thighs)
- irregular vaginal bleeding
- bleeding between periods
- vaginal spotting or discharge
- pain during sex
- bleeding after sex

## Feedback and contact information

CervicalCheck welcomes your feedback.

Email: [info@cervicalcheck.ie](mailto:info@cervicalcheck.ie)

Freephone: 1800 45 45 55

Website: [hse.ie/cervicalcheck](http://hse.ie/cervicalcheck)

Post: CervicalCheck, Freepost LK407, Limerick

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