

Information sheet on Cervical Screening

What is cervical screening?

A cervical screening test (smear test) is a way of detecting abnormal cells in the cervix (neck of the womb). Abnormal cells are sometimes also known as pre-cancerous cells.

If not detected, these abnormal cells could develop into cervical cancer, so removing them can prevent cancer. It is estimated that regular cervical screening can prevent 75% of cervical cancer cases.

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

What is involved in cervical screening?

A GP (doctor) or nurse takes a sample of cells from your cervix. This may be slightly uncomfortable but should not be painful. It only takes a few minutes. The sample is sent to a quality-assured laboratory. It is examined under a microscope and if required, is also tested for the presence of HPV (human papillomavirus).

Abnormal cells in the cervix are caused by certain types of the HPV. HPV is a very common virus. Most people will have it at some time in their lives. HPV virus is the main cause of cervical cancer.

What are the benefits of cervical screening?

Regular cervical screening:

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

If 1,000 women are screened, about 20 women will have abnormal cervical cells. About 15 women will have these cells detected through screening. About five 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:

- sometimes they do not look much different from normal cells
- there may be very few abnormal cells in the sample
- the person reading your sample may miss the abnormality (this happens occasionally, no matter how experienced the reader is.)

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.

What do my 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 – in an outpatient clinic.

False positives and negatives

Sometimes test results are inaccurate. We call these '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 confirm there was no risk of cancer at that time.

For full details go to hse.ie/cervicalcheck



Information sheet on Cervical Screening



False negative results

A result may be reported as negative (normal cells), 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. You can read about symptoms in the leaflet we sent you and on [hse.ie/cervicalcheck](https://www.hse.ie/cervicalcheck)

Giving your consent

Each time you have a cervical screening test we will ask you to give your consent by signing a 'Cervical Screening Form'. 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 the 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

This means we will not contact you about the Cervical Screening Programme in the future.

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 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 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, reviews and audits and to check the quality and effectiveness of the Cervical Screening 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. 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://www.hse.ie/cervicalcheck)

How will I find out about my test results?

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

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.

For full details go to [hse.ie/cervicalcheck](https://www.hse.ie/cervicalcheck)



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service



Approved by NALA



AN CLÁR NÁISIÚNTA SCAGTHÁSTÁLA CEIRBHEACS
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME