**Cervical Screening (smear test)**

**About cervical screening**

Cervical screening is a free health test that helps prevent cervical cancer. It checks for a virus called high-risk human papillomavirus (HPV) and, if you have HPV, cervical cell changes (abnormal cells).

**What is cervical screening?**

Cervical screening is a free health test available on the NHS as part of the national cervical screening programme. It helps prevent cervical cancer by checking for a virus called high-risk HPV and cervical cell changes. It is not a test for cancer.

It is your choice whether to go for cervical screening. We hope this information helps you make the best decision for you and your health.

If you have symptoms, contact your GP surgery about having an examination. Cervical screening is not for people who have symptoms.

**Who is invited for cervical screening?**

You should be invited for cervical screening if you have a cervix. Women are usually born with a cervix. Trans men, non-binary and intersex people may also have one.

In the UK, you are automatically invited for cervical screening if you are:

* between the ages of 25 to 64
* registered as female with a GP surgery.

You may get your first invite up to 6 months before you turn 25. You can book an appointment as soon as you get the invite.

**How often will I be invited for cervical screening?**

Your cervical screening result will help decide when you are next invited for cervical screening.

You may be invited:

* every year
* every 3 years
* every 5 years
* straight to colposcopy for more tests.

**Cervical screening invites and coronavirus**

Across the UK, cervical screening invites are being sent. If you have an invite, or had your test cancelled because of coronavirus, you may now be able to book an appointment.

**What are the benefits and risks of cervical screening?**

You are invited for cervical screening because evidence shows that the benefits of the test outweigh any risks. Along with the HPV vaccine, cervical screening is the best way to protect against cervical cancer and prevents over 7 in 10 diagnoses. However, like any screening test, cervical screening is not perfect and there are some risks.

**Benefits of cervical screening**

* Cervical screening aims to identify whether you are at higher risk of developing cervical cell changes or cervical cancer. This means you can get any care or treatment you need early.
* England, Scotland and Wales now use HPV primary screening, which is even better as it is based on your individual risk. This means how frequently you are invited for cervical screening is based on your last result and within a timeframe that is safe for you.

**Possible risks of cervical screening**

* In a few cases, cervical screening will give an incorrect result. This means it may say someone does not have HPV or cell changes when they do (a false negative). Going for cervical screening when invited can help reduce this risk, as it is likely HPV or cell changes that were missed would be picked up by the next test. It also means a result may say someone does have HPV or cell changes when they don’t (a false positive), which could mean they are invited for tests or treatment they don’t need.
* Sometimes cell changes go back to normal without needing treatment. At the moment, we can’t tell which cell changes will go back to normal, so treating means we can be sure we are preventing them from developing into cervical cancer. This means some people may have unnecessary treatment, which is called overdiagnosis or overtreatment. Using HPV primary screening should help prevent this.

It is hard to know exactly how many people are affected by these risks. But we do know, for those aged 25 to 64, the benefits of cervical screening outweigh the risks and most results will be clear.

**Opting out of cervical screening**

If you decide not have cervical screening, ask your GP to be taken off their invite list. If you change your mind, you can ask your GP to add you back to the list at any time.

Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust is an independent charity and cannot opt you out of the National Cervical Screening Programme.

For further information please speak to your GP or practice nurse or visit the Jo’s Trust website [**https://www.jostrust.org.uk/**](https://www.jostrust.org.uk/)