

What happens to smear samples?

The laboratory that examines your smear keeps all smear samples for 10 years. This means that it is possible to compare smears taken from you at different times. You will be contacted if these comparison checks suggest that your care should be changed in any way. Additionally, your sample may be subject to further testing, including HPV testing, to enable the NHS to evaluate how well it is preventing cervical cancer.

How is information from smear tests used?

The Scottish Cervical Screening Programme keeps a record of your personal screening information including smear test results. Only authorised staff and appropriate healthcare professionals, such as your doctor, have access to this information. All NHS staff are bound by a strict code of confidentiality.

Smear test information may be used for anonymised research, public health, education and training purposes. Any smear test samples and information used in this way will be anonymised i.e. it will have personal details removed so that they cannot be linked to a named individual. Smear test information is also used for clinical audit. This helps to ensure that the cervical screening service meets agreed standards, and it also identifies areas for improvement.

You can object to the use of your smear test sample and information for these purposes, and the NHS is obliged to agree, if it is possible to do so. You also have a legal right to see personal information held about you in written medical records or on computer. Please contact the Data Protection Officer at your local NHS board if you would like to know more about how your smear test information may be used.

Key points to remember

- Cervical screening reduces the risk of developing cervical cancer, and saves over 1,000 lives every year in the UK.
- Most cervical cancer is caused by the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), a virus that is very common and easily spread by sexual activity.
- You should have regular cervical screening even if you have been immunised against HPV.
- Cervical smear tests cannot pick up every abnormality of the cervix or prevent every case of cervical cancer.
- Abnormalities in cervical cells can get better without treatment, but they always need to be followed up.
- Even if you have regular smear tests, you should see a doctor as soon as possible if you notice any unusual discharge or bleeding.
- Make sure your doctor has your current address, so that you can be automatically invited for regular smear tests.
- If you would like to know more about cervical screening, talk to your nurse or doctor, visit **www.nhs24.com/cervicalscreening** or phone the free NHS Helpline on **0800 22 44 88**.

Look after yourself and remember that regular smear tests save lives.

More information is available in other languages and formats at www.healthscotland.com/publications

If you do not have web access, or need help to do this, contact your local NHS board or phone the free NHS Helpline on **0800 22 44 88** (textphone 08001 0800 22 44 88).

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the cervical smear test

explained

In the UK the cervical smear test saves over 1,000 lives every year and prevents 8 out of 10 cervical cancers from developing.

This leaflet explains what a cervical smear test is and what happens during the test.

What is a cervical smear test?

It is a cervical screening test to check whether the cells in the cervix (the neck of the womb) are normal. It aims to identify any abnormalities that may develop into cervical cancer, so that they can be simply and effectively treated.

Most cervical cancer is caused by the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) which can damage cells in the cervix. This is a very common virus that is easily spread by intimate skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. Most women will be infected with HPV at some point in their life without knowing it, as there are usually no symptoms. Usually these HPV infections clear up on their own but not always. If HPV gets into the lining of the cervix, it can stay there for several years without causing any harm. Occasionally, however, HPV may start to damage the cells and cause abnormal changes, which if left untreated can develop into cancer.

These changes can be detected by cervical screening. In the UK the smear test saves over 1,000 lives every year and prevents 8 out of 10 cervical cancers from developing. However, it cannot prevent all cases.

Who should have a smear test?

All women aged between 20 and 60 years who have ever had sex should have regular cervical smear tests. In Scotland, women in this age group are routinely invited to have a smear test every 3 years. You should contact your doctor if it is more than 3 years since you last had a smear and you have not recently been invited to have a test.

Even if you have been immunised against HPV, it is important that you take up your first screening invitation at the age of 20, and then continue to have regular cervical screening. This is because the vaccine does not protect you against every type of HPV that can cause cervical cancer.

It is important to see your doctor as soon as possible if you have any unusual discharge or bleeding.

Who carries out the smear test?

Usually your practice nurse or doctor will carry out the smear test. If you prefer, you can have your smear test at your local well woman clinic or family planning clinic, where these are available. Whichever clinic you use, if you would prefer to see a female doctor or nurse you can always request this.

You should make an appointment for the test on a day when you will not have your period, so that the nurse or doctor who does the test can see your cervix clearly. If you use a spermicide with a condom or cap for contraception, or a lubricating jelly, please avoid having sex for 24 hours before your appointment. This is because the chemicals in spermicides and lubricating jelly may affect your smear test.

What happens during the smear test?

You will be asked to remove your underwear from the waist down, lie on your back on an examining couch, and bend your knees. The doctor or nurse will gently insert a tube called a speculum into your vagina to hold it open, so that the cervix can be seen. The doctor or nurse will then gently brush cells from the cervix. The cells will be sent to a laboratory, where they will be examined under a microscope.

Does the smear test hurt?

Having a smear test should not hurt, but you may feel some discomfort. It is understandable that you may feel a little embarrassed or anxious about having this test, but the doctor or nurse who takes your smear will make it as easy for you as possible. Let them know if you are feeling nervous and they will help you to relax.

Who sees the test result?

The written result of your smear test will be posted to you within 4 weeks. It will be sent directly to the name and address that you give to the person who carries out your test. The result will also be sent to whoever took your smear, and to your own doctor, even if you had your test done by someone else.

If you haven't received your result within 4 weeks, contact the person who carried out your test.

What will the results letter say?

In most cases it will say 'no abnormalities', and will confirm that the cells in your cervix are normal. If your result is normal, you will be automatically invited to have another smear test in 3 years' time.

Sometimes the laboratory finds that there are 'not enough cells' in your smear sample for the laboratory to examine under the microscope. This happens in about 2 out of 100 cases. You will be asked to have another smear test done as soon as possible.

Sometimes abnormal cells are found in your cervix. The letter will explain your result and what to do next. If the changes to the cells are very small or 'borderline', they may clear up on their own. Otherwise, you may be asked to come for a repeat or follow-up test, or to have further investigations. It is important to follow up all abnormal results and treat them if necessary.

Speak to your doctor or nurse if you have any worries or questions about your result and what action you need to take.