

Information on:

# HPV testing

Jo's cervical  
cancer trust



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# HPV testing

This booklet covers:

- What is HPV?
- How do you get HPV?
- HPV testing
- Results of HPV testing



## What is HPV testing?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) testing has been introduced across the whole of the UK, in one form or another, as part of the National Cervical Screening Programme. An HPV test is carried out using the same sample of cells taken during a cervical screening test. In the laboratory the cells are analysed for current high-risk HPV infections.

HPV testing is important because it identifies women with a high risk type of HPV. If a woman contracts high-risk HPV and this becomes a persistent infection then she has a higher possibility of developing abnormal cells. Therefore, she should be monitored more closely to reduce her risk of developing cervical abnormalities and cervical cancer.

## What is HPV?

HPV is an extremely common virus. There are over 100 different types of HPV. Some HPVs cause non-cancerous skin warts that commonly appear on the hands and feet. Around 40 types of HPV affect the genital area of men and women, including the skin of the penis, vulva (area outside the vagina) and anus, and the linings of the vagina, cervix and rectum <sup>i</sup>.

Around 13 of these types are thought to be associated with the development of cancer and are called 'high risk'. The high risk types most likely to cause cervical cancer include HPV 16 and 18. The remaining genital HPV types do not cause cervical cancer, but they can cause other problems, such as genital warts.

## How do you get HPV?

Anybody who has ever been sexually active is at risk of contracting high-risk HPV. Genital HPV is transmitted primarily by genital-to-genital contact, or by vaginal, anal or oral sex.

HPV is the most widespread sexually transmitted infection; 80% (four out of five) of the world's population will get some type of the virus at least once <sup>i</sup>. If you catch high-risk HPV, in the majority of cases the body's immune system will clear or get rid of the virus without the need for treatment. In fact, you would not even know that you had contracted the virus.

The time from exposure to the virus to the development of warts, cervical abnormalities or cervical cancer is highly variable. The virus can remain dormant in some people for long periods of time, this can be months and sometimes years. Usually it is not possible to determine exactly when or from whom the infection originated.

## HPV testing

An HPV test is carried out using the same sample of cells taken during a cervical screening test. The results of HPV testing combined with cervical screening cytology (examination of the cells under a microscope) enables faster investigation of those at higher risk of developing cervical cancer and reassurance to those at very low risk. The test can also reduce the number of unnecessary screening and colposcopy appointments among women with borderline/low grade cervical screening cytology results or who have been treated for abnormal cells.

In the laboratory, the sample of cells is analysed for a high risk HPV infection. If the cells have been infected with high risk HPV, the test will give a positive result for high risk HPV types.

HPV testing is now available throughout the whole of the UK and each country has their own policy (Table 1). Currently, in the UK, HPV testing may be offered to women in the following ways:

- **HPV primary screening** – new screening method where the sample of cells taken during cervical screening is first tested for high risk HPV to help decide if further examination is needed. If no high risk HPV is found, the woman is returned to the routine screening programme (every three or five years depending on her age). If high risk HPV is found, cytology is done on the cells to confirm if cell changes are present, and the woman may be referred for colposcopy <sup>ii</sup>
- **HPV triage** – used when a woman has a cervical screening result of borderline or low grade dyskaryosis (see our Information Booklet on Cervical Screening for more information). The same sample of cells will then be tested for high risk HPV. If the test is high risk HPV positive, the woman will be referred for colposcopy. If the test is high risk HPV negative, the woman will be returned to routine screening.

HVP triage is important because it allows earlier identification of women who need treatment. Women with either borderline or low grade dyskaryosis only have around a 15–20% chance of having a significant abnormality that requires treatment [iii](#). If a woman does not have high risk HPV even though her screening result showed slightly abnormal cells, the risk of cancer being present is negligible; thus, the woman can return to normal routine screening [iv](#).

- **Test of cure** – uses HPV testing to identify if a woman has been successfully cured after treatment for abnormal cervical cells. The HPV test will be given to women who have undergone treatment for cervical abnormalities at the first appointment they have after finishing treatment (usually about six months later). The test is done in combination with cervical screening cytology. If high risk HPV is not found and the screening test comes back negative, then the woman has been successfully treated by removing the abnormal cells and will return to her regular screening schedule.

The HPV test helps to confirm that the woman’s risk of developing further cervical abnormalities has returned to the same low level of risk as the general population. If a high risk HPV infection is found (HPV positive) or the screening test shows an abnormality, the woman will be again referred to colposcopy for further investigation.

HPV test	Country			
	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Primary HPV test	Roll out 2019	No	No	Roll out 2018 / 2019
HPV triage	✓	✓	No	✓
Test of cure	✓	✓	✓	✓

**Table 1.** HPV testing in the UK

## Results of HPV testing

Results of HPV testing will be sent to you in the post, either by your doctor or by a local health care agency. For HPV triage and test of cure the results letter will include the cervical screening cytology and the HPV test results. The letter will tell you what action you need to take, if any. If you have not received a result letter within two to three weeks, you should contact your sample taker. Women who are high risk HPV negative will not require further investigation and will return to normal screening intervals.

- **Receiving an high risk HPV positive result** – while cervical cancer is caused by infection with high risk types of HPV, it is important to remember that the vast majority of women with a high risk HPV infections will not have any problems at all. The term ‘high risk’ refers to the HPV virus. It does not mean that the woman is at high risk of getting cervical cancer. In fact the overall risk is still low, it is just higher than for women who are not infected with any high risk types of HPV. That is why the HPV test is so essential; it allows women who have a high risk type of HPV and low grade cervical abnormalities to be monitored more closely.

Remember, most women are infected with HPV at some point in their lives without ever knowing they have been infected. HPV is usually cleared (without treatment) by the body’s own immune system like other viral infections, such as a cold.

## References

- i. Giuliano AR et al., 2008. Epidemiology of human papillomavirus infection in men, cancers other than cervical and benign conditions. *Vaccine* 26 (10), K17–K28.
- ii. Cancer Research UK, 2015. HPV and cancer. [www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/infections-hpv-and-cancer/hpv-and-cancer](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/infections-hpv-and-cancer/hpv-and-cancer). Accessed: 07.01.2016.
- iii. NHSCSP, 2010. Colposcopy and programme management, guidelines for the NHS Cervical Screening Programme (Second Edition). NHSCSP Publication 20, 12–13.
- iv. Sahasrabudde et al., 2011. Human papillomavirus and cervical cancer: biomarkers for improved prevention efforts. *Future Microbiology* 6 (9), 1083–1098.

We also have information on:

- Cervical cancer
- Cervical screening
- HPV
- HPV vaccine
- LLETZ

The information included in this publication was correct at the time of going to press. We plan to review publications after two years however updates may happen more frequently. For updates or for the latest information, visit [jostrust.org.uk](http://jostrust.org.uk).

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