



### Smoking

Smoking doubles your risk of developing cervical cancer and can make it harder to treat abnormal cells.

### The Pill

Research shows that taking the Pill can slightly increase the risk of cervical cancer. But the Pill can help to protect against womb and ovarian cancers.

### Family history

Women who have a close relative with cervical cancer have a higher risk of developing the disease.

### What is HPV?

- Human papillomavirus or HPV is caught by having sexual contact with someone who has it.
- Most adults will be infected with HPV at some point. Four out of five people are infected with HPV at some stage in their life.
- The virus does not normally cause any problems and usually clears up on its own.
- But some types of HPV can cause changes in the cervix that may lead to cervical cancer.
- The types of HPV that cause warts are different from the ones that cause cancer.
- The types of HPV that cause cervical cancer have no symptoms.
- HPV itself does not show up in the current cervical screening test. The test detects early changes in the cervix that are caused by HPV. Treating these changes prevents cancer developing.

### HPV vaccination

Girls aged 12–13 are offered a free vaccination to protect against cervical cancer. Three injections are given by a nurse at school over six months. There has also been a 'catch up' programme to vaccinate older teenage girls.

The vaccine could prevent at least seven out of 10 cervical cancer cases. But it does not protect against all types of HPV, so it is still important to go for cervical screening.

### What should I look out for?

If you notice any of the signs and symptoms described in this leaflet make sure you see your doctor.

Look out for:

- bleeding between periods
- bleeding during or after sex
- bleeding after the menopause
- any unpleasant vaginal discharge
- discomfort or pain during sex.

These may be signs of other common conditions. They do not necessarily mean you have cancer. But it is best to get them checked out.

### Further information

For more about screening and the signs and symptoms of cancer visit [www.spotcancerearly.com](http://www.spotcancerearly.com)

For more about cancer visit our patient information website [www.cancerhelp.org.uk](http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk)

If you want to talk in confidence about cancer, call our information nurses on freephone **0808 800 4040**.

Our health messages are based on scientific evidence. Find out more at [www.cancerresearchuk.org/health](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health)

All our leaflets are thoroughly researched and based on the most up-to-date scientific evidence. They are reviewed externally by independent experts and updated regularly. You can order our full range of leaflets free online at [www.cancerresearchuk.org/leaflets](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/leaflets)

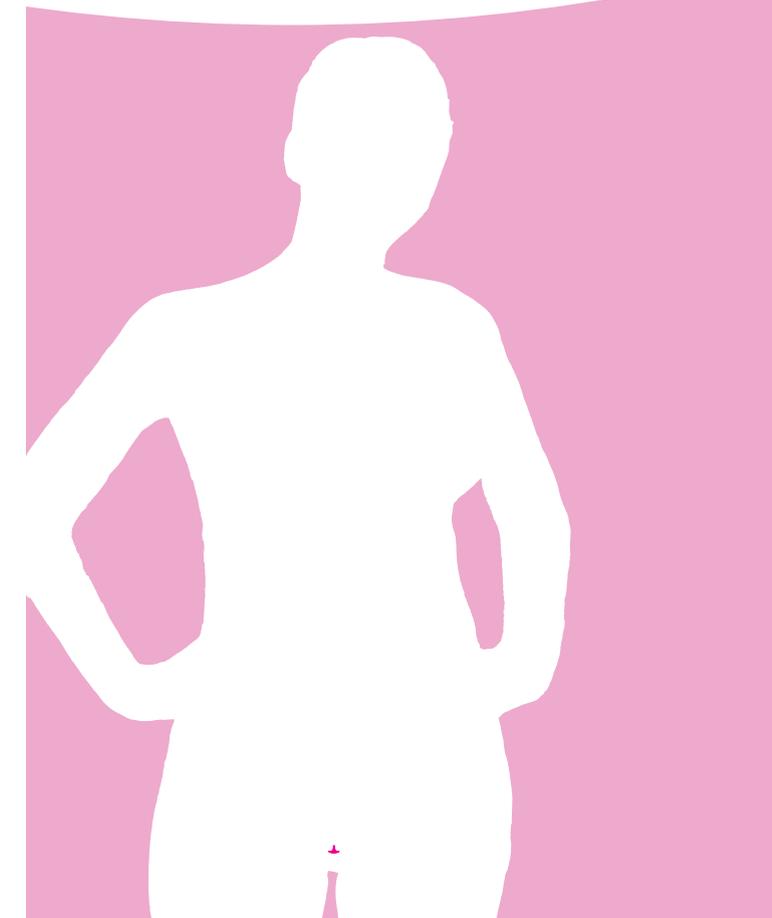
### About Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is the world's leading charity dedicated to research into the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cancer. If you would like to support our work, please call **020 7121 6699** or visit our website [www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

*Together we will beat cancer*

# Preventing cervical cancer

## why screening is important





## Most cases of cervical cancer could be prevented

### Thanks to cervical screening (which many people know as the 'smear test'), doctors can find and treat early changes in the cervix before they develop into cancer.

#### In this leaflet you can find out about:

- the cervix
- why it is so important to go for cervical screening
- what will happen at your cervical screening test
- symptoms of cervical cancer
- what affects your risk of cervical cancer.

#### How common is it?

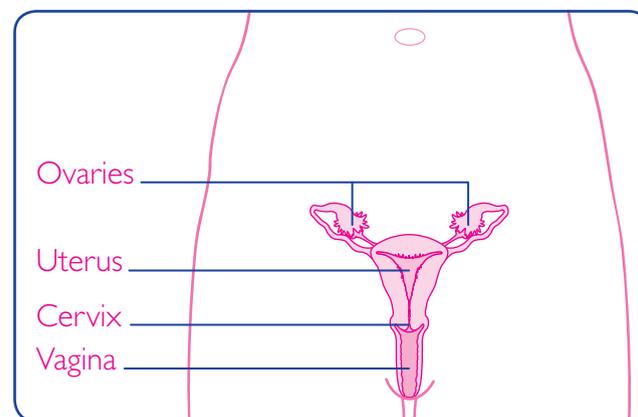
Because of the national screening programme the number of new cases of cervical cancer is falling.

There are around 2,800 new cases of cervical cancer in the UK every year. It is the most common cancer in women under the age of 35. But cervical cancer can affect women of any age who are, or once were, sexually active.

#### What is the cervix?

The cervix is a very strong muscle that connects a woman's womb and her vagina. It forms a small opening which lets through menstrual blood and sperm. During childbirth the cervix opens up to let the baby out.

Cervical screening checks the health of the cervix.



#### Why is cervical screening so important?

Cervical screening helps doctors find changes in the cervix early before they have a chance to develop into cancer. Treating early changes can prevent cervical cancer from developing.

**Cervical screening saves around 5000 lives every year in the UK.**

#### Who can go for cervical screening?

Local health services across the UK invite women for free cervical screening tests at their local doctor's surgery or clinic.

Women who are registered with a doctor are invited for cervical screening every three to five years, from their early to mid 20s to their early 60s. If you are not registered with a doctor, call **NHS Direct** on **0845 4647**.

**It is important to go for your cervical screening test whenever you are invited.**

#### What is the cervical screening test?

The test, which many people know as the 'smear test', is very simple and only takes around five minutes. It should not be painful although some women do find it slightly uncomfortable. You can ask to see a female doctor or nurse.

The doctor or nurse will take a sample of cells from your cervix using a small brush. These cells are then put in a small pot of liquid and sent to a laboratory to be looked at carefully under a microscope.

In the past, cells used to be taken using a spatula and then smeared onto a glass slide. This was called the smear test.

#### What happens after the test?

Most women have normal results. Sometimes a sample is not clear enough and you may need to have another test. If you have an abnormal result this does not mean you have cancer. It means that some of the cells in your test may have undergone changes and may need to be treated. If you have an abnormal result your doctor will talk to you about having further tests.

Like other screening tests, cervical screening is not perfect. There is a small chance that abnormal cells might be missed, or that the results incorrectly show abnormal cells or cell changes that need to be treated. This can mean cells that would not have developed into cancer could be treated.

But most experts agree that the benefits of cervical screening outweigh these difficulties.

#### What affects your risk?

##### HPV

Nearly all cases of cervical cancer are linked to a common sexually transmitted infection called human papillomavirus or HPV.

##### Sexual history

Women who first had sex at a young age or have had several sexual partners have a higher risk of developing cervical cancer. This is because they are more likely to get HPV infection. But HPV is a very common infection which can affect anyone who has ever been sexually active.

Condoms protect against many sexually transmitted infections. And they can reduce your chances of getting or spreading HPV infection.