

HPV and Cervical (Pap) Screening

Overview

Cervical screening is an important test that helps prevent cervical cancer. It checks for high-risk types of human papillomavirus (HPV), which can cause changes to cervical cells over time. Screening aims to detect HPV early, before any serious problems develop.

What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a very common virus, with most sexually active people exposed at some point in their lives. There are many types of HPV. Some are considered high risk because they can cause changes in cervical cells that may, if left untreated, develop into cervical cancer. In most cases, the immune system clears HPV naturally without treatment.

What is Cervical (Pap) Screening?

Cervical screening, sometimes called a smear test or Pap test, involves taking a small sample of cells from the cervix. In the UK, the sample is first tested for high-risk HPV. If HPV is not detected, no further testing is needed. If HPV is detected, the sample is then checked for abnormal cell changes.

Why Cervical Screening Is Important

Cervical screening does not test for cancer. It helps identify HPV or early cell changes before symptoms develop. Detecting and monitoring these changes significantly reduces the risk of cervical cancer.

NHS Cervical Screening

The NHS Cervical Screening Programme offers routine screening to people with a cervix aged 25 to 64. Those aged 25 to 49 are invited every five years, and those aged 50 to 64 every five years, provided results are normal. Screening is free of charge and follows national recall and follow-up pathways.

Private Cervical Screening

Private cervical screening may be appropriate if you are not currently eligible for NHS screening, are overdue, have symptoms, or would prefer screening at a time and setting that suits you. Private screening does not replace NHS recall but can complement NHS care. Results are discussed in detail, and onward referral to NHS services is arranged where appropriate.

Key Differences Between NHS and Private Screening

NHS screening follows strict national recall intervals and eligibility criteria. Private screening offers greater flexibility with appointment timing, longer consultations, and additional support for those who find screening difficult or uncomfortable. Both use the same high-quality laboratory testing standards.

HPV and Menopause

During perimenopause and menopause, cervical screening remains important. Hormonal changes can make the test more uncomfortable, but adjustments such as smaller speculums or topical vaginal oestrogen may be recommended to improve comfort. HPV can remain dormant for many years, so a positive result does not necessarily indicate a recent infection.

The HPV Vaccine

The HPV vaccine protects against the most common high-risk types of HPV linked to cervical cancer. Vaccination significantly reduces risk but does not remove the need for cervical screening.

Your Screening Appointment

The test usually takes only a few minutes. A speculum is gently inserted to allow access to the cervix, and a small brush is used to collect cells. Most people experience mild discomfort rather than pain.

Results and Follow-Up

Most people receive results within a few weeks. If HPV is not detected, you will be advised on routine recall. If HPV is detected, further monitoring, repeat screening or referral may be recommended depending on the findings.

Why Choose Our Clinic?

Screening is carried out by an experienced women's health clinician in a calm, supportive environment. We offer unrushed appointments, tailored support for menopause-related discomfort, and clear explanation of results with appropriate follow-up.