

Cervical Cancer

In the UK, approximately 3,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer each year is the twelfth most common women's cancer in all ages. It occurs frequently in women who are under 35 years old and Breast cancer is the only other cancer to occur more often within this age group. In the UK, a woman's lifetime risk of developing cervical cancer is about one in 116 (0.86%). In the UK, more than 1,000 women die from cervical cancer each year.

The cervix is the lower part of the entrance to the womb. It is sometimes referred to as the neck of the womb. Each month the lining of the womb sheds, causing bleeding that is commonly known as a period.

Cancer of the cervix usually takes many years (10-20) to develop. Before it does, the cells in the cervix often show changes, known as cervical intra-epithelial neoplasia (CIN). This precancerous cell stage is also sometimes known as dyskariosis. If left untreated, CIN can develop into cervical cancer. However, the majority of women with CIN do not develop the disease.

Although some forms of cervical cancer are becoming more common, it can be prevented if it is detected in the early stages via cervical screening. Regular cervical screening is the best way to identify abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix. Following the introduction of the national HPV vaccination programme, the NHS cervical screening programme will continue to play an important part in checking women who are between 25-65 years of age for early-stage cell changes

Cervical Screening

Cervical screening picks up abnormalities in about 200,000 women a year, and around 3000 women a year are diagnosed with cervical cancer.

Cervical screening is not a test for cancer, but checks for cell changes that may, if left untreated, go on to develop into cancer. In many cases, cell changes will go back to normal on their own. In some cases, the abnormal cells will need to be treated.

The NHS Cervical Screening Programme aims to reduce the number of women who develop cervical cancer and the number of women who die from the disease. Being invited for cervical screening does not mean you are particularly at risk from cervical cancer – all women aged 25 to 64 are invited.

Attending screening regularly should mean that any abnormal changes in the cervix are identified early on. If needed, treatment can be given quickly to prevent cancer developing.

Human papilloma virus

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is the name of a family of viruses that affect the skin and the moist membranes that line your body, such as those in your cervix, anus, mouth and throat.

There are more than 100 different types of HPV viruses, with about 40 types affecting the genital area. These are classed as high risk and low risk

What HPV infection can do

Infection with some types of HPV can cause abnormal tissue growth and other changes to cells, which can lead to cervical cancer. Infection with other forms of HPV can also cause genital warts.

Other types of HPV infection can cause minor problems, such as common skin warts and verrucas.

Around 30 types of HPV are transmitted through sexual contact, including those that can cause cervical cancer and genital warts. Genital warts are the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the UK.

99% of all cervical cancers are caused by HPV. It is also linked to vaginal cancer and vulval cancer, although both are rare conditions.

HPV Vaccination

Since September 2008 there has been a national programme to vaccinate girls aged 12-13 against HPV, using the Cervix vaccine

There is also a three-year catch up campaign that will offer the HPV vaccine to 13-18 year old girls.

The programme will be delivered largely through secondary schools, and consists of three injections that are given over a six-month period. By having this vaccination, girls will be protected against the commonest cause of cervical cancer for many years to come. The vaccine protects against two Human Papilloma Viruses (HPV) 16 & 18 that together are responsible for at least 75% of the disease in the UK.

It has been shown that the vaccine provides the best protection if it is given at 12 to 13 years of age but also up the age of 25 years. Because the virus is so common, and the vaccine won't work against the cancer-causing types 16 and 18 if they are already in the body, postponing the vaccination until after sexual activity has started would mean that a young woman may not be protected and could therefore become infected with the cancer-causing virus. The best age and time to have the vaccine is between 12 and 18 years, well before a girl starts any kind of sexual activity.

This is the first time a vaccination programme against cervical cancer has been provided in this country. So we now have the opportunity of helping to prevent the spread of a very serious disease that affects over 3000 women every year in the UK and causes over 1000 deaths.

More information is available on www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Cancer-of-the-cervix and www.immunisation.nhs.uk/hpv, where you can also find a scientific fact sheet on the disease, the virus and the vaccine, as well as links to other useful websites. You can also talk to your GP or practice nurse.

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