

The Pap smear test has now changed to the Cervical Screening Test.

Cervical cancer is the growth of abnormal cells in the lining of the cervix. Cervical cancer incidence and mortality rates have halved in Australia since the introduction of the National Cervical Screening Program in 1991.

The Cervical Screening Test

A number of changes came into effect on 1 December 2017. These changes recognise the role of the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), which causes almost all cases of cervical cancer. HPV is a very common sexually transmitted infection which usually shows no symptoms and goes away by itself. Persistent HPV infection can cause abnormal cells to develop on the cervix. Over a long time, these abnormal cells may develop into cervical cancer if left untreated.

The Cervical Screening Test procedure is similar to a Pap smear test. For both tests a doctor or nurse takes a sample of cells from the cervix. However, the Pap smear test used to look for abnormal cells in the cervix, while the Cervical Screening Test looks for HPV infection. The new test for HPV can identify women who could be at risk of cervical cancer earlier than the Pap test could.

Women aged 25 to 74 years of age should have a Cervical Screening Test two years after their last Pap test. Subsequently, you will only need to have the test every five years if your results are low risk.

The new screening program is designed to work together with the HPV vaccination program to help reduce the incidence of cervical cancer. Women who have been vaccinated against HPV still require cervical screening, as the vaccine does not protect against all cancer-causing types of HPV.

Why has the age for my first screening changed?

Cervical cancer in women under 25 is rare, and the benefits of screening women before age 25 are uncertain. For this reason, many countries and international bodies recommend that women under 25 are not screened. Australia has now updated its recommendations to match these. Additionally, most women under the age of 25 will have been vaccinated for HPV.

Why have a Cervical Screening Test?

The new Cervical Screening Test is more accurate than the Pap smear test and the best test available for the prevention of cervical cancer. All women between the ages of 25 and 74 should have a HPV test every five years.

What about the vaccine for cervical cancer?

Vaccines are now available that prevent the types of HPV infection that cause most cervical cancers but do not protect against all the types of HPV that can cause cervical cancers.

All vaccinated and unvaccinated women still need to have a Cervical Screening Test every five years.

What does my Cervical Screening Test result mean?

There are four possible results from the cervical screening process. These are:

- **Low risk (HPV not detected).** No high risk (cancer causing) HPV was found. The chance of developing cervical cell changes that would need treatment in the next five years are very low. You should wait five years before having another cervical screening test.
- **Intermediate risk.** Your test results show that you do NOT have HPV types 16 or 18 (the highest risk types), but that you have one of the other high-risk HPV types. Your sample will have already been examined in the laboratory to check for abnormal cell changes. You will be asked to return in 12 months for a follow-up HPV test, as the infection will usually be cleared by your body in this time.
- **Higher risk.** Your test results show either HPV infection with types 16 and/or 18, high grade cell changes on your cervix or persistent infection with one of the other high-risk HPV types. It is important that you have a follow-up because you may be at high risk of developing cervical cancer.
- **Unsatisfactory.** The sample cannot be properly examined. There are a number of reasons why this may happen – for example, the number of cells may be too small, or there may not be enough liquid to perform all the tests needed. An unsatisfactory result does not mean there is an abnormality or a positive test, but it is important to repeat a test at the recommended time. This is not a cause for alarm.

It's important to remember that HPV infections usually clear on their own. Also keep in mind that most abnormal cells are not cervical cancer, and can usually be treated quickly and painlessly.

WHERE CAN I GET RELIABLE INFORMATION?

Cancer Council 13 11 20

Information and support for you and your family for the cost of a local call anywhere in Australia.

Cancer Council Cancer Screening website

cervicalscreening.org.au

National Cervical Screening Program 13 15 56

cervicalscreen.health.gov.au

HPV vaccine

hpvvaccine.org.au