

- **What is cervical cancer?**

Cervical cancer is a type of cancer that starts in the cervix, which is the lower part of the uterus. The cervix is made up of millions of cells. Changes can occur in these cells and, if left untreated, can develop into cervical cancer. Worldwide, cervical cancer is the third most common type of cancer in women.

- **What is pre-cancer?**

Pre-cancer is when changes first appear in the cells of the cervix before cervical cancer develops. With early detection and appropriate treatment, most cases of cervical cancer can be cured at this stage before progressing into cervical cancer.

- **What causes cervical cancer?**

More than 99% of cases of cervical cancer are caused by HPV infection. HPV infection is very common. In fact, 4 in 5 women are exposed to it at some point in their life. There are more than 100 different types of HPV, of which, 14 are considered high-risk with respect to developing cervical cancer. Of these 14 high-risk types, HPV 16 and 18 cause 70% of all cervical cancer cases. Women with HPV 16 or 18 are 35 times more likely to develop cervical pre-cancer than those without HPV.

- **How is HPV contracted?**

Anyone who is sexually active can get HPV - even if you've only had one sexual partner or even if you use condoms. HPV can live in the body for more than 10 years with no symptoms until cervical pre-cancer develops and advances, so you could have the virus even if it has been many years since you've had sexual contact.

- **What are the symptoms of HPV?**

HPV infections often have no symptoms, so women may have HPV infection and not know it.

- **Why is testing for high-risk HPV important?**

HPV is the leading cause of cervical cancer, responsible for 99% of all cases. However, HPV infections often have no symptoms so the only way for a woman to know if she has the virus is through testing.

A high-risk HPV test can tell the doctor whether a patient is at risk of cervical cancer before anything abnormal shows on a Pap smear. This is important because data show that one in 10 women who tested positive for either HPV 16 or 18 had cervical pre-cancer, even though their Pap test was normal.

- **Who should be screened for HPV?**

Women 30 -65 years of age and have been sexually active should be tested for HPV. A woman can contract HPV even if she has only had one sexual partner or even if it has been many years since she had sexual contact with an infected person. Unless a woman is tested for HPV, it is unlikely she will know that she has the virus as there are usually no symptoms.

Testing for HPV 16 and 18 allows women to know their risks of developing cervical cancer and enables their doctor to manage and prevent the disease from developing. Early detection of cervical cancer in the pre-cancer stage can lead to better treatment and ultimately save lives.

- **How is a HPV Test conducted?**

A HPV test is a simple test that is done in the same way as a Pap smear - it can be done at the same time or separately. A test for HPV is generally carried out by a doctor or gynaecologist.

- **I have had a Pap smear so why should I get a test for HPV?**

The high-risk HPV test can tell the doctor whether you are at risk of cervical cancer before anything abnormal shows on a Pap smear.

The high-risk HPV Test tells the doctor whether or not you have HPV 16 and/or 18 which together cause 70% of all cases of cervical cancer. Women with HPV 16 and/or 18 are 35 times more at risk of developing cervical pre-cancer than those without the viruses. A Pap smear cannot test for HPV 16 and 18 or any of the other 12 high-risk HPV types associated with cervical cancer.

A Pap smear can miss up to 50% of cervical pre-cancer cases. Early detection of pre-cancer is critical and by identifying risk, a doctor can put preventative measures in place and help reduce your risk for developing cervical cancer. HPV testing is very easy and can be done at the same time as (or separately from) your Pap smear.

- **If I test positive for HPV 16 or 18, does that mean I have cervical cancer?**

Testing positive for HPV 16 or 18 does not mean you definitely have cervical cancer; however it means that you are at a higher risk of developing the disease.

By identifying the risk earlier, a doctor can administer appropriate treatment and put preventive measures in place and reduce the risk or even prevent cervical cancer from developing.

- **What should I do if I test positive for HPV 16 / 18?**

A healthcare professional will advise on the next steps for a woman who tests positive for HPV 16 and/or 18 and further investigation may be required.

- **What does it mean if I test negative for HPV 16 / 18 and do not have the virus?**

If you test negative for HPV 16 / 18 and other high-risk HPV types it means you are at low risk of developing cervical cancer. Depending on the recommendations from your doctor, you should return for re-testing in 5 years.

- **What is a colposcopy?**

A colposcopy is a medical procedure where a doctor uses a colposcope (a lighted magnifying device) to see problems in the cervix that would be missed by the naked eye. A tissue sample may also be taken for laboratory analysis to determine if there are changes indicating cervical pre-cancer or cancer.

- **I have been vaccinated against cervical cancer/HPV, do I still need to get tested?**

Although vaccination may reduce the chance of women contracting HPV, it does not protect women who have already been sexually active at the time of vaccination and may have already contracted the HPV virus. The HPV vaccination also does not cover all high-risk HPV types so even if a woman has been vaccinated, testing is still required to ensure she is not at risk of pre-cancer.

- **Where can I go to get a HPV test?**

Speak with your family doctor or gynecologist about being tested for high-risk HPV, especially HPV 16 and 18.