

# Cervical Smear Tests



## What women need to know

Taku hauora, taku tinana,  
taku tūmanako

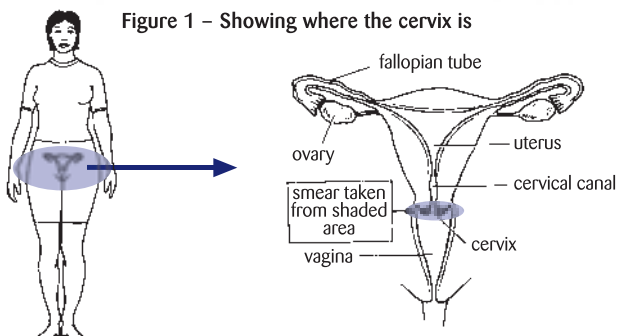
My health, my body, my future



## Kia ora and welcome

Being part of the National Cervical Screening Programme and having cervical smear tests every three years can prevent cervical cancer. A cervical smear test shows if there are abnormal changes in cells on the surface of the cervix.

(See Figure 1.)



## Cervical cancer and the human papillomavirus

- Cervical cancer is caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is a sexually transmitted infection that affects almost all people at some point in their lives.
- There are many types of HPV. Most HPV infections will clear up by themselves.
- Only a few types of HPV will lead to abnormal, precancerous cells that could progress to cancer.
- Although there is no medication for persistent HPV infections, there is treatment for the abnormal cells that HPV can cause.

Having regular smear tests every three years is the best way of finding and treating abnormal cell changes and preventing cervical cancer from developing.






## Who should have cervical smear tests?

All women aged 20 until they turn 70 who have ever been sexually active should have regular smear tests.

Women who have had a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus) need to check with their doctor or smear taker whether they still need to have cervical smear tests.

## Where do you go for a cervical smear test?

The choices include:

-  your doctor or practice nurse
-  Family Planning clinics
-  your sexual health service
-  marae-based or other Māori health centres
-  community health centres, eg, Pacific health centres and women's health centres.

Most of the above services have women smear takers.

The cost of a cervical smear test will be what you would normally pay to see your doctor or nurse. Some community or primary health organisations offer a free or low-cost service.

## How often do women need a cervical smear test?





-  Women are advised to have a cervical smear test every three years. Research shows very little extra benefit from having more frequent smears.
-  Cervical cancer usually takes many years to develop. Any abnormal cells can be found and treated to stop them from becoming cancer.
-  If this is your first cervical smear test, or if you have not had a test for over five years, you will be advised to have a second test in a year's time.
-  In some circumstances, you may be advised to have a test more often, eg, after an abnormal result.

Figure 2 – Showing the benefits of cervical screening

Without screening*	With regular 3-yearly screening*
One out of 90 women will develop cervical cancer.	One out of 570 women will develop cervical cancer.
One out of 200 women will die from cervical cancer.	One out of 1280 women will die from cervical cancer.

\*Estimated New Zealand figures

## The cervical smear test

You will be asked to lie on your side or your back with your knees bent up. The lower part of your body will be covered with a sheet. The smear taker gently opens the vagina with a speculum and carefully takes a sample of cells from the surface of the cervix with a small broom or tiny brush. This process will take only a few minutes. The sample is then sent to a laboratory to be examined.

Some women may find the test uncomfortable, but it does not usually hurt. If you are embarrassed or nervous, tell your smear taker how you feel. You can take a support person with you if you wish. It is best not to have the test during your period.

Cervical screening, like all screening, is not 100% effective and some women will still develop cervical cancer despite regular screening. While the risk of cervical cancer can be reduced, it cannot be eliminated by screening. Other tests, eg, testing for HPV (human papillomavirus) are now available to help decide when treatment is necessary.

## HPV (cervical cancer) vaccine

Women who have received the HPV vaccine must continue to have cervical smear tests.

## Getting your cervical smear test results

You will need to contact your smear taker to get your results. They will usually take from two to four weeks. The programme will only contact you if you have had an abnormal result. You will be informed by mail and also advised about any follow-up needed.

## Cervical smear test results

Most test results are normal.

Some women may be asked to come back for another test if there were not enough cells in the liquid preparation to test.

If you have an abnormal result, you may be called back for a further smear in 6–12 months, or be referred to a specialist (colposcopist) for colposcopy. The results from these tests may show there are no abnormal cells and no treatment may be needed. An abnormal result hardly ever means cancer.

See the pamphlet **Cervical Screening: Understanding Cervical Smear Test Results**, code HE4598.







## Colposcopy

Colposcopy is an examination of the cervix, using a magnifying lens called a colposcope. The colposcope looks like a pair of binoculars on a stand. It magnifies the cervix and vaginal wall so that the abnormal cells can be found. (See the pamphlet **Colposcopy**, code HE1202.)

## Ma te mōhio ka ora Knowledge improves health and well-being

### An important message

See your doctor if you have:

-  bleeding or spotting between menstrual periods
-  bleeding or spotting after sexual intercourse
-  bleeding or spotting after your menstrual periods have stopped (after menopause)
-  persistent pain in your pelvis
-  pain during sexual intercourse
-  unusual discharge from the vagina. The discharge might be smelly, have changed colour from white to pink, brown, or green, or be streaked with blood.

These symptoms can happen for several reasons and rarely mean that you have cervical cancer. However, they should be checked by your doctor.

## The National Cervical Screening Programme

The programme aims to prevent cervical cancer. All women who have cervical smears are part of the programme unless they say that they do not want to be.

The benefits of recording cervical smear test information include:

- 🔄 ready availability of records to you, your smear taker and the laboratory reading your tests
- 🔄 automatic reminder letters when you are overdue for having a cervical smear test
- 🔄 checks to ensure the right follow-up after an abnormal smear test
- 🔄 planning for the needs of different ethnic groups.

The programme is checked regularly to see that it is working well and it is measured against national quality standards to help all women get the best possible screening and treatment.

### What information is collected?

The information collected by the programme includes your personal and contact details, relevant clinical history, cervical results and any treatment details. This confidential information is stored on a computer system called the NCSP Register, which is managed by the Ministry of Health. For more information about the legislation governing the NCSP, ask to see the booklet **Prevention of Cervical Cancer: A Guide for Women in New Zealand**, code HE1328.

- 🔄 Any woman can withdraw from the programme at any time by filling in a form or by writing to the programme.
- 🔄 In order to ensure no follow-up, your name, address, date of birth and national health index number will be kept, but the programme will not track your smear history.
- 🔄 You can rejoin the programme at any time, and your screening history with the programme will recommence with your most recent smear.







## Further information

Read the free booklet **Prevention of Cervical Cancer: A Guide for Women in New Zealand**, code HE1328, obtainable from your doctor or smear taker.

Visit our website: [www.cervicalscreening.govt.nz](http://www.cervicalscreening.govt.nz)

View this pamphlet and other health education resources at [www.healthed.govt.nz](http://www.healthed.govt.nz)

Contact:

-  the National Cervical Screening Programme, freephone **0800 729 729**
-  your doctor or practice nurse
-  Pacific health centre, marae-based or other Māori health centres
-  your local women's community health centre
-  your local Family Planning clinic
-  your local Cancer Society.

For more information contact the National Screening Unit, the Ministry of Health, phone Auckland (09) 580 9000, or Wellington (04) 496 2000.

If you change your address, please advise your smear taker and the National Cervical Screening Programme, freephone 0800 729 729, or email [info@ncspregister.health.nz](mailto:info@ncspregister.health.nz)