

# Cervical Screening

What you need to know

Taku hauora, taku tinana, taku tūmanako  
My health, my body, my future.

[www.timetoscreen.nz](http://www.timetoscreen.nz)



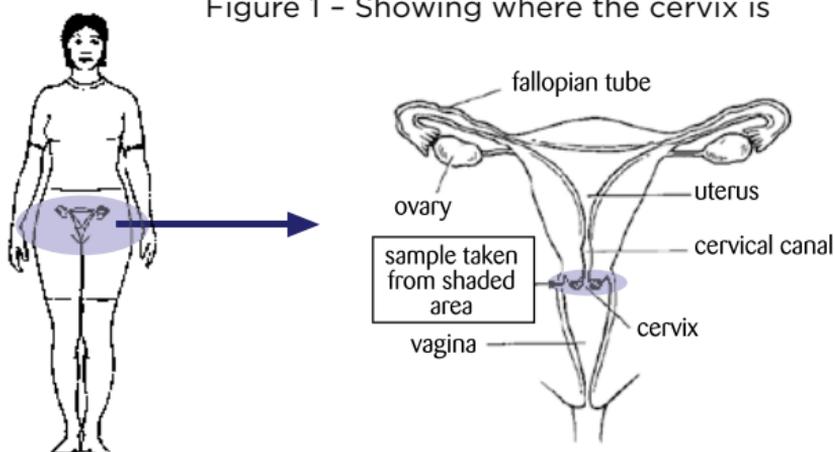
**Time to  
screen**

National  
Cervical  
Screening  
Programme

## Kia ora and welcome

Being part of the National Cervical Screening Programme (NCSP) and having cervical screening tests every three years can prevent cervical cancer. The test shows if there are abnormal changes in cells on the surface of the cervix. If untreated, abnormal cells can develop into cervical cancer over time. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1 - Showing where the cervix is



## Cervical cancer and human papillomavirus

- Almost all cervical cancer is caused by human papillomavirus (HPV), which is spread by sexual activity. Eighty percent of people who have been sexually active will have an HPV infection 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.
- Cervical cancer usually takes many years to develop. Through regular screening, abnormal cells can be found and treated before becoming cancer.

## Who should have cervical screening?

If you have ever been sexually active, you should have regular cervical screening every 3 years from age 25 until you turn 70.

If you have had a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus) you need to check with your health provider if you still need to be screened.

## Where do you go for cervical screening?

The choices include:

- your doctor or practice nurse
- Family Planning clinics
- community health centres, eg, Māori health centres, Pacific health centres, or women's health centres.

You are usually charged a fee for the test. Some Māori and Pacific providers and community and primary health organisations offer a free or low cost service.

## How often do you need cervical screening?

- Cervical screening is recommended every three years. Research shows very little extra benefit from having more frequent tests.
- However, if this is your first cervical screening 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.



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

## The cervical screening 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 nurse or doctor gently opens the vagina with a speculum and carefully takes a sample of cells from the surface of the cervix with a small soft brush. This process will take only a few minutes. The sample is then sent to a laboratory to be examined.

You may find the test uncomfortable, but it does not usually hurt. If you are embarrassed or nervous, tell your health provider 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.

In some situations you may be offered an HPV test – which tests for the virus that may lead to cervical cancer. The HPV test is performed on the same sample as the cervical screening test, so there is no need to have a second test.

## How accurate is cervical screening?

There is always a small chance that some abnormal cells may not be found by the test. Abnormal changes to the cervical cells progress very slowly, so it is very likely that any abnormal cells that are missed will be picked up at the next test.

On the other hand, there is also a small chance a result will say that abnormal cells have been found when your cervix is normal. A further cervical screening test or colposcopy may confirm this.

## HPV (cervical cancer) vaccine

The HPV vaccine protects against some high-risk types of HPV. However, it doesn't protect against them all, so it's important to continue with cervical screening even if you've had the vaccine. The vaccine is free for everyone, male and female, aged 9 - 26 years, including non-residents under the age of 18.

## Getting your cervical screening results

Your health provider will discuss with you how you will receive your results. Results are usually available in 2-4 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 screening results

Most test results are normal, however you may be asked to come back for another test if there were not enough cells in the sample to test.

If you have an abnormal result, you may be called back for a further test in 6-12 months, or referred to a specialist (colposcopist) for colposcopy. This assessment may show there are no abnormal cells and treatment is not needed.

An abnormal result hardly ever means cancer.

See the pamphlet **Cervical Screening: Understanding cervical screening 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 so that the abnormal cells can be found. (See the pamphlet **Colposcopy: Information for women**, 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
- an unusual or persistent 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. Anyone who has a cervical screening test is part of the programme unless they say they do not want to be.

The benefits of recording cervical screening information include:

- ready availability of records to you, your health provider and the laboratory analysing your tests
- automatic reminder letters if you are overdue for having a cervical screening test
- checks to ensure the right follow-up after an abnormal cervical screening 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 or used?**

Your cervical screening and colposcopy results are recorded on the National Cervical Screening Register (NCSP Register). The information can be requested by your health provider and is used by the programme for monitoring and evaluation under strict rules of confidentiality.

De-identified laboratory specimens and results may be used for quality control or teaching purposes.

## **Withdrawing from the programme**

You 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. When you withdraw, any cervical screening tests recorded on the register will be deleted and future tests are not recorded.

## Further information

Contact:

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

Visit our website: **[www.timetoscreen.nz](http://www.timetoscreen.nz)**

If you are new to screening visit **[www.starttoscreen.nz](http://www.starttoscreen.nz)**

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

The National Cervical Screening Programme also has the following resources:

- **Cervical Screening: Understanding cervical screening test results**, code HE4598
- **Colposcopy: Information for women**, code HE1202.



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

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