The introduction of HPV testing to cervical screening in Scotland

Key messages

• From March 2020, cervical cytology (looking at cells under a microscope) will be replaced by human papillomavirus (HPV) testing as the primary (first) screening test in the Scottish cervical screening programme.

• Cytology-based tests will still be used but only when high-risk HPV is found in a woman’s sample.

• HPV testing is a more sensitive and effective test for identifying women who are at risk of cervical cancer. It will help ensure any changes are found and treated earlier.

• The HPV test will be carried out using the same samples of cells taken during a cervical screening (smear) test, so the cervical screening experience for women will not change.

• If no high-risk HPV is found in a woman’s sample, the woman has a very low risk of developing cervical cancer within 5 years, as it takes around 10 to 15 years to develop after an HPV infection. They will therefore be invited for their next routine cervical screening appointment in 5 years’ time, regardless of their age.

• Women will be invited for their cervical screening appointment by letter with a supporting leaflet, as they are now.

• The anticipated go-live date for all of Scotland is 30 March 2020.

• Our ambition is to eliminate cervical cancer in Scotland. To help achieve this, we’re vaccinating young girls and boys in secondary school and moving to a new, better way of testing cervical screening samples.

*Please note, throughout this document, where we refer to ‘women’, we mean ‘women and anyone with a cervix’.
What is changing in the Scottish cervical screening programme?

From 30 March 2020, cervical cytology (looking at cells under a microscope) will be replaced by human papillomavirus (HPV) testing as the primary (first) cervical screening test. Cytology-based tests will still be used but only when high-risk HPV is found in a woman’s sample.

HPV testing is also referred to as high-risk HPV (Hr-HPV) testing because the test looks for certain high-risk types of HPV which can cause cancer.

The HPV test will be carried out using the same samples of cells taken during a cervical screening (smear) test, so the cervical screening experience for women will not change.

What is the link between HPV and cervical screening?

HPV is a common virus transmitted during sexual contact. High-risk HPV types are linked to the development of abnormal cells that can cause cervical cancer. HPV is the main cause of cervical cancer.

Why is HPV testing replacing cytology as the primary test?

The UK National Screening Committee (UKNSC) recognises that using HPV testing as the primary (first) test in the cervical screening programme is a better way of identifying women who are at risk of cervical cancer. HPV testing is more sensitive for high-grade cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) than cytology (looking at cells under the microscope). Cytology-based tests will still be used, but only if high-risk HPV is found in the woman’s sample.

This means that HPV testing will be more effective and will identify more women who are at risk of developing cervical cancer. This will save more lives by determining a woman’s risk earlier and will help to ensure any changes are found and treated earlier.

It will also bring Scotland in line with the expected direction of travel for national screening programmes within the rest of the UK, Europe and beyond.

HPV testing was introduced into the cervical screening programme in Wales in September 2018, and will be introduced in England from late 2019 and in Scotland in March 2020.
What is the relationship between the introduction of HPV testing into cervical screening and the HPV vaccine?

The introduction of HPV testing is also aligned with the continuing success of the HPV immunisation programme in Scotland. HPV immunisation has been offered to girls in secondary school in Scotland since 2008, and the programme has now been expanded to boys from September 2019. Please visit www.nhsinform.scot/immunisation for more information on the HPV vaccine in Scotland.

Cervical cytology will become increasingly less effective as a primary screening test, as the numbers of immunised women in the screened population increase. HPV testing is a more appropriate test for these women because the incidence of CIN is much lower.

Should women who have been immunised against HPV still attend their cervical screening appointment?

Immunising against the HPV infection protects against cervical pre-cancer, and recent research shows that it’s the combination of HPV vaccination and cervical screening that will eventually eliminate cervical cancer in Scotland. However, it cannot prevent all cervical cancer.

It will be important to emphasise to women that even if they have been immunised they should still attend their cervical screening appointment.

How will the cervical screening pathway change as a result of HPV testing?

The HPV test will be carried out using the same samples of cells taken during a cervical screening (smear) test so the cervical screening experience for women will not change.

If HPV testing finds that a woman does not have HPV, her chances of developing cervical cancer within 5 years are very small. She will therefore be invited for her next routine cervical screening appointment in 5 years’ time, regardless of her age.

Cytology-based tests will be used if high-risk HPV is found in a woman’s sample. Their pathway and subsequent follow-up will differ according to the test results.

The confirmed new pathway can be found on the next page.
Cervical screening sample sent to lab

HPV test

Negative

Positive

Cytology

Positive

HPV test in 12 months

Negative

Positive

Cytology

Negative

Positive

HPV test in 12 months

Negative

Positive

Colposcopy

Routine recall 5 years
How is the change being rolled out across Scotland?

HPV testing will be introduced for all of Scotland at the same time from early 2020. The anticipated go-live date is March 2020.

An Implementation Board has been set up to oversee the introduction of HPV testing in Scotland. Six distinct work-streams have been commissioned to ensure successful delivery of the change. These are IT, QA/EQA/Data, communications, clinical governance, laboratory re-configuration and procurement.

Minutes for each group will be added to the SharePoint site at www.solution-stewardship.scot.nhs.uk

What will women be told about the change to HPV testing from 2020?

Women will be invited for their cervical screening (smear) test by letter with a supporting leaflet, as they are now. Nurses and doctors in primary care will still carry out the cervical screening test, so women will not notice any difference in the way in which the sample is taken.

How we communicate the way the cervical screening sample is tested and what the results mean for women is being carefully considered to avoid confusion and/or disengagement with screening.

How will we ensure feedback from women is taken on board?

A communications group has been established to update the messages about cervical screening for women.

The group has completed some research, which provided clear insight into women’s understanding of HPV, cervical cancer and cervical screening. It is helping to inform the language we should use to update and refresh information materials, including the information sent to women inviting them to participate and informing them of their results.

A short research summary provides highlights of findings, the main one being the worry and confusion about HPV. This was mostly driven by lack of awareness and understanding about how common HPV is and how it’s spread. Many women were also concerned that screening frequency is decreasing from three to five years for women under 50 years. They were worried that they may get HPV and develop cervical cancer within the five-year period. A great deal of reassurance is needed to explain the rationale behind this change and that regular screening would pick up cell changes before they develop into cervical cancer.

The communications group is also working closely with Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust, a UK cervical cancer charity, who have been speaking to women across Scotland through their ‘Be Cervix Savvy’ roadshow about how they can reduce their risk of cervical cancer.
Will sample takers be trained on the planned change to HPV testing?

Yes, continuing professional development (CPD) will be available (details to be confirmed) for sample takers. There will also be opportunities for local training updates before the introduction of HPV testing.

How will cervical screening laboratory services change in response to HPV testing?

As part of the implementation of HPV testing, screening laboratory services will be centralised. NHS Chief Executives endorsed a two-laboratory model for Scotland, recommending that NHS Lanarkshire, and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde deliver both cervical cytology and HPV testing for the Scottish cervical screening programme. There will still be collection points for the transport of samples to the processing laboratories in existing laboratories so you will still send the screening samples to the same place that you use now.

Will the current cervical screening programme remain unchanged until the introduction of HPV testing?

Yes, cervical screening is routinely offered every three years to women aged between 25 and 49, and every five years to women aged between 50 and 64.

There will be a period of transition to HPV testing around the implementation date. For example, it may be that a woman receives the existing leaflet, but makes an appointment when HPV testing is introduced. It will be important that sample takers can explain the new test in these circumstances. Sample takers will be provided with supporting information for this purpose. Some women invited for screening in late 2019/early 2020 may wish to delay getting screened until HPV testing is implemented. It’s their decision when they make their appointment.

Where can I find out more information?

There is further information about the cervical screening programme in Scotland, including a range of resources for professionals on how to engage women in the programme, at: www.healthscotland.scot/cervicalscreening

Women should be signposted to NHS inform at www.nhsinform.scot/cervicalscreening or on 0800 22 44 88 for more information.

Do you have other questions about the introduction of HPV testing?

Please email Donna.McLean2@nhs.net if you have further questions about the implementation of HPV testing and we will update the frequently asked questions to reflect these.