



Don't Dread the Cervical Smear Test

The 'Jade Goody' effect has created a huge rise in demand for cervical screening in 2009. Yet many women still think of the smear test with dread. So what is the cervical screening programme and why should you get screened?

Cervical cancer has been brought to the public eye this year in the saddest of circumstances for Jade Goody and her family. It would have been almost impossible to miss the media attention given to the reality TV star's battle against and death from cervical cancer on 22nd March 2009. But if any good has come from the wall-to-wall coverage given to her illness, it is that awareness of the value of cervical screening has soared, increasing demand for the smear test by as much as 50 percent¹ in some areas.

Why is cervical screening so important?

You're most likely to develop cervical cancer in your 30s. Cervical cancer is the most preventable type of cancer. Even so, it is the UK's second greatest cancer killer of women in their early 30s². Two out of every 100 cases of cancer diagnosed in women are cervical cancer³, with around 2,800 women being diagnosed with cervical cancer every year in the UK.

The NHS cervical screening programme screens almost four million women in England each year⁴. In total, about 8 in 100,000 women still get cervical cancer every year in the UK³. However, early treatment following an abnormal smear result can prevent changes to the cervix from developing into cancer.

What causes cervical cancer

The major cause of cervical cancer is human papillomavirus (HPV), which you get through sexual contact. There are more than 100 types of HPV but only 13 types cause cancer. Other forms of HPV are harmless, while some cause genital warts. You can only get HPV if you are sexually active.

Incredibly, as many as 8 out of 10 people in the UK are infected with HPV at some time during their life³, although most of these infections clear up by themselves. The HPV virus can damage cells on the surface of the cervix, leading to changes that, over time, can develop into cervical cancer.

A vaccine is now available against two strains of HPV, which are responsible for over 70 percent of cervical cancer. But because the HPV vaccine does not protect against all forms of cervical cancer, it is still really important even for girls who have been vaccinated to have cervical screening later in life.

Changing cervical screening rates

Cervical screening is shown to be around 95 percent effective in reducing death rates from cervical cancer⁴. Even so it is estimated that 40 percent of women under 35 still don't have regular smear tests.

Over the past decades, the number of women being tested has declined from 83 percent to 79 percent, with the number of women aged 25-29 being screened dropping from 79 percent in 1998 to as low as 66 percent in 2008². In 2009, as a result of Jade Goody's highly publicized battle against cervical cancer, it seems that this trend has finally reversed.

Who goes for cervical screening tests

Women are invited for a free cervical screening test on the NHS from the age of 25. Then from 25 to 49, women are offered screening every three years, provided that their smear results are normal. By having cervical screening every three years, this should mean that any abnormalities are detected before they get too serious. From the age of 50 to 64, women are invited for cervical screening every five years.

Should younger women have cervical smears?

Originally, the UK's cervical cancer screening programme screened women from the age of 20. However, women under the age of 25 are no longer offered the cervical smear test in England because invasive cancer is very rare in women younger than 25, yet changes in the cervix are common. This means that younger women may get an abnormal result when actually there is nothing wrong.

The NHS therefore holds the view that screening women under the age of 25 might create unnecessary anxiety and result in unnecessary investigations and treatment.

Despite this, it's still not absolutely certain whether screening should commence at a younger age. In Wales, Scotland and Ireland, women are still being screened from the age of 20 until the evidence is conclusive. So if you are under 25 and are worried about developing cervical cancer, talk to your GP or go to a well woman clinic.

When and where you can have the test

You can have a smear test your local GP surgery or a clinic that specialises in family planning, genito-urinary medicine (GUM) or well woman services.

If you prefer, you can ask for a female nurse or doctor to do your test, or a chaperone for a male doctor or nurse, although it's best to ask for this as soon as you make your appointment.

Remember to book your smear appointment when you are mid-cycle, as it's not always easy for the doctor to take a smear test while you are having a period.

What the smear test involves

When you go for your smear test, you'll be asked to take off your knickers and lie on the couch, or bed with your knees up and apart.

To conduct the smear test, the doctor or nurse puts a metal speculum inside your vagina. The speculum has two arms which open the vagina, so the cervix can be viewed clearly. A sample of skin cells is collected from the cervix with a small brush. The sample is then put into a pot of liquid and sent to the laboratory.

The smear test is uncomfortable rather than painful and the more relaxed you can remain, the easier it will be. Breathing slowly and deeply, while imagining yourself far away on a sunny beach, may help you to avoid tensing up.

What happens when you get the results

The smear results are sent back to the surgery or clinic where you had the test. You may not be contacted if everything is normal. However, if you ask when your results are due in, you can always call the surgery to confirm everything is fine.

If your results are borderline, showing small cell changes, you may be asked for a repeat smear in six months to check whether the cell changes have progressed or whether they have returned to normal.

If the results are abnormal or the smear test could not be read properly, you will be contacted to come into the surgery for a repeat smear or to discuss your results.

References

1. <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-wellbeing/health-news/jeremy-laurance-jades-memorial-is-a-rise-in-cervical-cancer-screening-1651723.html>
2. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/feb/17/cancer-tests-jade-goody>
3. <http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk/help/default.asp?page=2755#common>
4. <http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervical/#invited>
5. http://www.immunisation.nhs.uk/Vaccines/HPV/HPV_and_cervical_cancer

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

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