

Welcome to the first of a range of themed newsletters! Please feel free to take a copy home.



The Swanage Medical Practice Cervical Screening Newsletter

Ladies, we need to talk seriously about smears! Take up of cervical screening/smears has hit a 20 year low. This means that 1.2 million women are risking their lives by avoiding smear tests. Are you aware that every year in the UK, around 3,000 women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer? Cervical cancer is the most common cancer in women aged 35 and under. In 99.7% of cases, cervical cancers are caused by persistent infections with a virus called *high-risk human papillomavirus* (HPV). HPV is a very common virus transmitted through skin to skin contact in the genital area. Around four out of five sexually active adults (80%) will be infected with some type of HPV in their lives. For the majority of women this will not result in cervical cancer. While HPV infection is common, cervical cancer is rare BUT the potential consequences are serious... this is why, despite the low risk, you must be screened.



At Swanage Medical Practice we take the screening programme very seriously. There can't be an eligible woman aged between 25 & 64 in our town that isn't receiving regular recall letters. Disappointingly, despite our efforts, many of you are avoiding the test. Please read this flyer carefully & help us, help you, take control of your own health outcomes.

Cervical Screening @ Swanage Health Centre; The Facts

- ◆ Women registered at the practice are invited for cervical screening between the ages of 25 and 64. Women aged 25–49 are invited every three years & women aged 50–64 are invited every five years.
- ◆ Women may be invited for screening up to 6 months before the age of eligibility (ie., at 24 years and 6 months old).
- ◆ The test is performed by one our specially trained female Practice Nurses.
- ◆ On receipt of an invitation letter or text all you need do is phone or come into the surgery to book an appointment.
- ◆ Mid cycle is an ideal time to have the test, but as long as you are not bleeding, anytime is OK.
- ◆ If you are feeling anxious the specially trained nurse will talk you through the test so that you have complete understanding of what is happening.
- ◆ Feel free to bring a friend, family member or partner for support should you so wish.
- ◆ You will be asked to undress from the waist down, behind a screen, and position yourself on a consulting couch with your feet pressed together & your knees apart.
- ◆ Don't be embarrassed, the nurse is focused on your health & doing the test correctly, not on what you 'look like'.
- ◆ Remember that cervical screening is NOT a test to find cancer. It is a screening test to detect changes to the cells of the cervix, which are called cervical abnormalities or pre-cancer. (see overleaf)
- ◆ Between 90 & 94% of all screening results come back normal.
- ◆ On the rare occasion that an abnormality is found you will be referred for treatment.
- ◆ It is important to remember that an abnormal result rarely means cancer.
- ◆ **Having regular cervical screening is the BEST protection against developing cervical cancer.**

★ **Worth knowing..... Cervical screening saves nearly 5,000 lives a year in the UK!** ★

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Frequently asked questions & answers that we hope will encourage you to take this life saving test.....

Q: Is cervical screening painful?

A: The procedure should not be painful, but some women can experience a degree of discomfort. Being screened (especially if it's the first one) can be daunting for some, so it may help to find out beforehand exactly what happens during a cervical screening appointment. The appointment should take no longer than 20 minutes, with the procedure itself taking about 3 minutes. If you feel any pain and/or discomfort during the procedure please inform the practice nurse. Speculums come in different sizes so you can ask for a smaller one.

Q: Should lesbian and bisexual women go for cervical screening?

A: Yes. All women, regardless of sexual orientation, who are over the age of invitation should have regular screening. Most cervical abnormalities are caused by persistent infection with HPV. As HPV can be transmitted through skin-to-skin contact in the genital area, women from the LGBTQ community are equally at risk of contracting HPV & experiencing abnormal cervical changes &, thus, should attend when invited for screening.

Q: Is there anyone who may not need to go for cervical screening?

A: A small minority of women may not need a cervical screening.

*Women who have never been sexually active: The incidence of cervical cancer is extremely rare for these women. Most cervical cancers are linked to infection with sexually transmitted high risk HPV so it is recommended that if you have ever had sexual intercourse or genital-to-genital contact with a man or a woman, **even just once**, then you should attend for regular screenings. The same applies even if you are not currently in a sexual relationship but have in the past or have been in the same relationship for many years.*

Women over 65: who have had three normal test results in a row are not called back for further screening tests. It is very unlikely that women in this category will go on to develop cervical cancer. If you are over 64 and have had abnormal results, you will continue to be invited for screening until the cells return to normal. Women aged 65 and over who have never had screening are entitled to a test. If you have never had a screening test and have been sexually active, you should have a test, regardless of your age.

Certain groups of women who have had hysterectomies: Some women who have had a hysterectomy are still thought to be at risk of developing abnormal cells and so should continue to have regular screenings. For example, if your womb was removed but you still have your cervix. If your womb and cervix were removed to prevent or treat cancer, you may still be asked to have a vaginal smear (vault smear) for a short period of follow-up. If your womb and cervix were removed for a benign (non-cancerous) condition, such as fibroids or heavy bleeding, you do not need to have any more cervical screenings.

Q: How long will I have to wait for my cervical screening results?

A: As cervical screening tests are reviewed by specialists who examine the cells under a microscope, the length of time taken to receive your screening results can vary. NHS guidelines state that you should receive the results of your screening within two to six weeks depending on where you live in the UK.

Q: Does an abnormal cervical screening mean I have cancer?

A: No. The vast majority of cervical screening results are normal, but a very small percentage of the total screenings reported on every year are described as being either 'inadequate' or having a grade of abnormality. The majority of these abnormalities reflect pre-cancerous changes in the cells of the cervix, not cancer.

Q: Why do some women get abnormal results and others never do?

A: Almost all women will be infected with HPV during their lives, but less than 1 in 10 will have an abnormal screening result. We do not know why this is. In some women it may be related to the immune system's ability to get rid of this virus quickly. If cervical cell abnormalities have been detected this does NOT mean that you have cervical cancer or that you will get cervical cancer in the future. What it does mean is that some of the cells of your cervix are slightly abnormal and that, if left untreated, they could go on to develop into cervical cancer at a later date. Medical research has yet to establish why some women have persistent HPV infection, develop abnormal cell changes or develop cervical cancer. This is why it is so important for all women to attend their NHS invitation for a cervical screening.

For further information we highly recommend you view this fantastic website that contains the most comprehensive information about cervical health that we have found:

www.jostrust.org.uk/about-cervical-cancer/cervical-screening-smear-test-and-abnormal-cells