

Cervical Screening Test (CST) Replacing the PAP SMEAR Changes from 1st December 2017

Every year approximately 800 Australian women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and approximately 250 women die from the disease. 80% of women who get cervical cancer have never been screened or have not been screened regularly. Most cervical cancer is preventable. Early detection of changes to the cervix can lead to early treatment which means better outcomes and a better chance of survival. The Pap Smear test is being replaced with the Cervical Screening Test (CST). This new test looks for the human papillomavirus (HPV) which is the cause of almost all cervical cancers (99%).

HPV is a common virus transmitted through sexual activity. In the past, the 2-yearly Pap test looked for changes in the cells of the cervix. The body normally clears the virus itself. When it persists however, cells can change and cervical cancer can develop. This can take more than 10 years.

The new test is more effective at detecting women at risk of developing cervical cancer by detecting HPV. Even if you have had the cervical cancer vaccine ("Gardasil"), you will still need cervical screening because the vaccine does not protect you from all types of HPV. If you have HPV, your sample will be examined again to look for abnormal cells. The sample is collected the same way as a Pap Smear. If you don't test positive for HPV, you will only need to have the test every 5 years, because you are at "low risk".

You will be sent a reminder when the next test is due, provided the National Cancer Screening Register (NCSR) has your up-to-date contact details. Medicare will fund one test each five years unless you have any signs of abnormal bleeding in which case additional testing may be done under Medicare.

The starting age of testing will now be at 25, instead of 18. Women are screened until they are between 70 -74. All women who have ever been sexually active should have regular cervical screening. This includes women who are HPV vaccinated or unvaccinated, haven't been sexually active for a long time, have only had sex with one partner or have only had sex with women. HPV is passed on through genital skin-to-skin contact, so you don't need to have intercourse to be exposed to an infection. It's important to remember that if you ever have any signs or symptoms, such as unusual bleeding (eg. bleeding between periods or bleeding after intercourse) or pain - don't wait until your Cervical Screening Test is due, and see your doctor as soon as possible.

PTO

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Your first Cervical Screening Test is due 2 years after your last normal Pap test. If your Cervical Screening Test does not find HPV, your next Cervical Screening Test will be due in 5 years.

If HPV is found in your cells, the same sample is viewed under a microscope to see if the cells have changed or become abnormal. Your doctor will let you know the next steps based on the type of HPV you have and whether your cells have changed or not. You might need to have another Cervical Screening Test in 12 months, or you might need to have further tests within the next few weeks.

Since the National Cervical Screening Program started in 1991, the number of women who have cervical abnormalities or cervical cancer has been closely monitored. This has found that screening women younger than 25 years every two years has not made an impact on preventing deaths from cervical cancer in this age group.

Cervical cancer is very rare in women younger than 25, but HPV is very common. Minor abnormal cell changes are also common; however, both HPV and minor abnormal cell changes usually clear up without needing treatment, usually within 1-2 years.

Now, based on a better understanding of how cervical cancer develops, we know that these abnormal cells in young women are very unlikely to develop into cervical cancer and in most cases will clear up without treatment.

The HPV vaccine offered to younger women has already reduced the number of cervical abnormalities, and will continue to reduce the risk of cervical abnormalities in this age group.

For more information, please visit the website – National Cervical Screening Program - <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/screening/publishing.nsf/Content/cervical-screening-1>