

Reviewing your cervical screening history: frequently asked questions

Cervical screening reduces the risk of developing cervical cancer. Regular screening is the best way to find changes to the cervix early on. But, like other screening tests, it is not perfect. Screening cannot identify every single case of cancer or pre-cancer.

Reviews are where we look into what has happened in the past. They are an important and routine part of every high-quality screening programme. Reviews can show us how well the screening programme is working and where improvements could be made.

The cervical screening process involves many different steps which aim to find and treat abnormal cells on the cervix, to prevent cervical cancer from developing. In most cases, a review will show that all steps have been followed correctly and that a cervical cancer has developed despite the screening programme working properly. Occasionally, a review may find that one or more steps in the process have not worked as well as they should. Reviewing your case history and previous tests will help find what has happened and may show where we could make improvements.



What happens in the review?

The review is usually carried out by the Trust responsible for your care. A group of professionals will look again at your cervical screening history up to the point when cervical cancer was diagnosed. This includes:

- Any letters inviting you to come for screening
- Any cervical screening tests you had in the last 10 years
- Any colposcopy (a visual examination of the cervix) referrals and appointments
- Any biopsies and treatment reports
- Follow-up arrangements
- Any other letters about cervical screening

They will also check whether your screening history meets national guidance.



What will the review show?

Most of the time, the review will show that the correct procedures have been followed and that you received appropriate care. Occasionally, a review may find that one or more steps in the process have not worked as well as they should and may show where we could make improvements.



Could my cancer have been found earlier?

In most cases the cancer will have been found at the earliest possible stage. Unfortunately, screening cannot prevent all cases of cervical cancer. Sometimes abnormal cells can develop and turn into cancer in between screening tests.

No screening test is 100% effective.

Sometimes, an HPV infection can be missed (a 'false negative' result).

Sometimes, abnormal cells cannot be seen on the slide because:

- the cells do not look very different from normal cells
- there may be very few abnormal cells on the slide

Because of this, the person reading the slide may miss the abnormality (this happens occasionally, no matter how experienced the reader is).

A colposcopy is a simple examination of the cervix using a type of magnifying glass. Sometimes, a colposcopy cannot identify abnormal areas of the cervix because:

- some types of abnormality are not easy to see
- the abnormal cells might be hidden higher up inside the cervix



How long does a review take and how do I find out the results?

A review takes up to six months. The Trust will let you know once the findings are available. You can then decide whether you wish to know the findings of the review. Your doctor may offer you an appointment to talk about the review findings.



What if I don't want to know the results of the review?

It is completely up to you to decide whether or not you want to know the results of the review. Your decision will not affect the care or treatment you receive.



What if I don't want to know the results of the review now, but change my mind later?

If you decide that you do want to know the results in the future, please contact your hospital doctor who will discuss the findings of the review with you.



Can my family ask for the results if I don't want to know?

No, unless you give permission, we cannot give your family members access to any details of your medical records.



What happens to the information collected for my review?

We collect screening information as part of an ongoing process. Your information goes towards improving the programme, and to help create a better understanding of how cancers develop and how they are diagnosed and treated. Any information relating to you will be kept strictly confidential. If you need more information about how your records are kept and used, you can contact the screening programme at screening.cervical@hscni.net



More information

If you have any more questions about your referral, treatment or the review process, please talk to your Clinical Nurse Specialist.

Alternatively, you may wish to write down any further questions you have and bring them with you to your next appointment.

Further information and support is available on the Be Cancer Aware website:
www.becancerawareni.info/resources/links

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