Understanding your cervical screening results

Your Cervical Screening Test looks for human papillomavirus (HPV), the virus that causes almost all cervical cancers. Your result shows your level of risk and what should happen next.

KEY POINTS

- More than 9 in 10 people have no HPV found. Their next test is usually in 5 years.
- Finding HPV is common. It does not mean you have cancer.
- If HPV is found, the laboratory also checks the cells from your cervix.
- Your result places you in one of three groups: low, intermediate or higher risk.
- Separate sheets in this series explain each result in more detail.

What the test looks for

HPV is a very common virus that is passed on through intimate skin-to-skin contact. Most people will have it at some time, and the body usually clears it within one to two years without any symptoms.

When some types of HPV stay in the body for a long time, they can cause changes to the cells of the cervix. Over many years, usually 10 to 15, some of these changes can develop into cancer. Screening finds HPV and cell changes early, when they can be monitored or treated.

If HPV is found, the laboratory looks at cells from your cervix under a microscope. This is called liquid-based cytology (LBC). If you collected your own sample, a clinician will need to take a sample from your cervix for this, either at a follow-up visit or at colposcopy.

LOW RISK	INTERMEDIATE RISK	HIGHER RISK
HPV not found	**HPV found (not type 16 or 18), with normal or low-grade cells**	**HPV 16 or 18 found, or other HPV with high-grade or glandular changes**
Your next screening test is usually due in 5 years.	A repeat HPV test in 12 months. Most of these infections clear on their own.	Referral for colposcopy, a closer look at your cervix.

Figure 1. The three result groups. Simplified from the National Cervical Screening Program guidelines.

What your result means

HPV not detected	Low risk. Your next test is usually due in 5 years. If you are aged 70 to 74, you can usually stop screening.
HPV 16 or 18 detected	Higher risk. You will be referred directly for colposcopy, whatever the cells show. See *HPV 16 or 18 found: what it means*.
HPV (not 16/18) detected, normal or low-grade cells	Intermediate risk. A repeat HPV test in 12 months. See *HPV found (not type 16 or 18): your follow-up tests*.
High-grade or glandular cells	Higher risk. Referral for colposcopy.
HPV (not 16/18) still found at follow-up	If HPV (not 16/18) is found at your first test and again at 12 and 24 months, you will be referred for colposcopy. If HPV is no longer found, you usually return to screening every 5 years.
When colposcopy may be sooner	If your immune system is weakened, any HPV found means referral for colposcopy straight away. If you are 50 or over, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, or were overdue for screening by 2 years or more, you will be referred if HPV is still found at your 12-month repeat test, rather than having a further repeat test.
After treatment	A different schedule applies. See *Test of Cure after treatment*.
Unsatisfactory	The sample could not be read. This is not a sign of a problem. A repeat test is usually needed in about 6 weeks.

Words you may see on your report

Oncogenic HPV	The types of HPV that can cause cancer. Types 16 and 18 carry the highest risk.
LBC	Liquid-based cytology: the cells from your cervix, checked under a microscope.
pLSIL or LSIL	Possible or definite low-grade changes. These usually clear on their own.
pHSIL or HSIL	Possible or definite high-grade changes. These need a colposcopy.
Glandular changes	Changes in the cells lining the cervical canal. These need a colposcopy.

Common questions

I have only had one partner. How did I get HPV?
HPV is very common and can stay inactive in the body for many years. It is usually not possible to know when or from whom it came.

Does smoking make a difference?
Yes. Smoking makes it harder for the body to clear HPV. Support to quit is available from Quitline on 13 78 48.

I have had the HPV vaccine. Why was HPV found?
The vaccine protects against most, but not all, types of HPV that can cause cancer. This is why vaccinated people still need screening.

Does my partner need a test?
There is no routine HPV test for men. Partners often already share the virus, and most people clear it without knowing they had it.

Common questions, continued

Is there a treatment for HPV?
There is no treatment for the virus itself. Your immune system usually clears it. Cell changes can be monitored and, if needed, treated.

Will HPV affect my fertility or pregnancy?
HPV itself does not affect fertility. If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, please let me know, as it may change the timing of tests or treatment.

Questions to ask your doctor

- What type of HPV was found, and what did the cells show?
- When is my next test due, and what kind of test will it be?
- Can I collect my own sample next time?

When to seek help

Some symptoms need checking whatever your screening result. Please see your GP or contact the rooms if you have bleeding after sex, between periods or after menopause, or ongoing unusual discharge or pelvic pain.

Rooms	03 8400 6193 — appointments and non-urgent questions, business hours
Urgent, after hours	Dr James Aridas, 0459 706 061 — urgent gynaecology concerns, and pregnancy concerns before 20 weeks
From 20 weeks pregnant	The birth suite at your booked hospital: Epworth Freemasons 03 9483 3833 · Cabrini Malvern 03 9508 6000 · Jessie McPherson 03 9594 2776
Emergency	Call 000 or go to your nearest emergency department

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

1. Cancer Council Australia. National Cervical Screening Program Guidelines, updated April 2025. cancer.org.au/health-professionals/clinical-practice-guidelines/cervical-cancer-screening
2. Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. National Cervical Screening Program: a summary guide for healthcare providers, February 2025. health.gov.au/ncsp
3. Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. Understanding the National Cervical Screening Program management pathway, 2025. health.gov.au/ncsp
4. RANZCOG. Cervical screening in Australia (patient information pamphlet), version 3, 2025. ranzcog.edu.au
5. Jean Hailes for Women's Health. Cervical screening test. jeanhailes.org.au/cervical-screening-test
6. National Cancer Screening Register: 1800 627 701 · ncsr.gov.au
7. Cancer Council information and support: 13 11 20

This information is general and does not replace individual medical advice. If your circumstances differ from what is described here, please discuss them with Dr Aridas.

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