Self-collection for cervical screening

Self-collection lets you take your own sample for cervical screening, using a simple swab in the lower vagina. For finding HPV, it is just as accurate as a sample taken by a clinician.

KEY POINTS

- It is available to everyone eligible for screening, aged 25 to 74.
- No speculum is needed. The swab goes only a short way into the vagina.
- The sample is tested for HPV. If HPV is found, you may need a clinician to take a cell sample.
- If HPV is not found, your next test is usually due in 5 years.
- It can also be used for some follow-up tests, including Test of Cure.

How to collect your sample

Your healthcare provider will give you the swab and instructions. You collect the sample in private, usually in a bathroom or behind a screen at the clinic. Always follow the instructions that come with the swab.

1. **Get ready.** Wash and dry your hands. Undress from the waist down and get comfortable, for example standing with one foot raised, squatting or lying down.
2. **Insert the swab.** Hold the handle and gently insert the soft tip about 4 to 6 cm into your vagina.
3. **Rotate it.** Gently turn the swab for 10 to 30 seconds. It does not need to reach the cervix.
4. **Return it.** Remove the swab, place it back in its tube, close the lid and hand it to your provider.



Figure 1. The swab. Only the soft tip and a short length of the shaft go into the vagina. Swabs vary; follow the instructions with yours. Not to scale.

When a clinician sample is better

- You have symptoms such as bleeding after sex, between periods or after menopause, unusual discharge or pain. These need an examination.
- You are being followed up after treatment for adenocarcinoma in situ (AIS), which needs a cell test.
- You have been asked to return for a cell test after HPV was found.

Your results

HPV NOT FOUND

Low risk. Your next test is usually due in 5 years. If you are having follow-up tests, such as Test of Cure, you may need another test sooner.

HPV 16 OR 18 FOUND

Referral for colposcopy. A cell sample is taken at the colposcopy.

OTHER HPV FOUND

Return so that a clinician can take a cell sample from your cervix, ideally within about 6 weeks.

A self-collected sample cannot be checked for cells. This is why a cell sample is needed if HPV is found. See the sheet *Understanding your cervical screening results*.

Common questions

Does it hurt?
Most people find it quick and comfortable. It is similar to inserting a tampon.

Can I do it while pregnant?
Yes. Self-collection is suitable during pregnancy.

Can I do it at home?
Usually it is done in private at the clinic. Doing it at home is usually fine, but please check with me first.

Does a doctor or nurse need to be in the room?
No. You do it in private. You can ask for help at any time, and they can help you with the swab without a speculum.

What if I do it wrong?
It is hard to get wrong. If the sample cannot be tested, you will be asked to repeat it.

Does it test for other infections?
No. It tests only for HPV. Ask me or your GP if you would like a sexual health check.

Can I do it during my period?
Yes. You can do it at any time in your cycle. Very heavy bleeding can affect the result, so some people prefer to wait until it has eased.

I have had the HPV vaccine. Do I still need screening?
Yes. The vaccine does not protect against every type of HPV that can cause cancer.

Questions to ask your doctor

- Is self-collection suitable for me?
- What happens if HPV is found?
- When is my next test due?

When to seek help

Self-collection is for people without symptoms. If you have bleeding after sex, between periods or after menopause, or ongoing unusual discharge or pelvic pain, please see your GP or contact the rooms for an examination.

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. Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. The Cervical Screening Test: frequently asked questions about the self-collect option, September 2025. health.gov.au/cervical-self-collect
6. Jean Hailes for Women's Health. Cervical screening test. jeanhailes.org.au/cervical-screening-test
7. National Cancer Screening Register: 1800 627 701 · ncsr.gov.au

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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