

What your Abnormal Smear Means Information Sheet

You have had an abnormal result from your cervical screening test (your smear test).

Cervical screening is designed to pick up minor changes before any problems develop, and almost certainly that is what the test has done for you.

An abnormal result is not unusual: about one in ten women have test results that show some abnormality.

It is important to remember that it is extremely rare for these abnormalities to be cancer.

Nearly all abnormal smears show no more than small changes in the cells on the cervix (the neck of the womb).

These changes act as an early warning sign that, over time, cervical cancer may develop.

WHAT DOES MY RESULT MEAN?

An abnormal result usually means that small changes have been found in the cells on the cervix (the neck of the womb). The name given to these changes is **dyskaryosis**.

In many cases these changes return to normal by themselves. But sometimes the changes become worse and could lead to cancer in the future. In such cases it is necessary to have a further examination which could show that treatment is needed. Treatment is simply and virtually 100 per cent effective.

Fortunately, it usually takes many years for cancer of the cervix to develop. So it is very rare, especially in women who have regular cervical screening, for an abnormal result to show that cancer has already developed.

WHAT DO I DO NOW?

For many women their abnormal result will show **borderline changes** or **mild dyskaryosis**.

These are small changes which often return to normal by themselves.

The changes are not cancer, and in most cases do not lead to cancer in the future. It is safe to give the small changes a chance to return to normal themselves without having immediate treatment.

If you have either of these results, your doctor will ask you to return for another smear test – a repeat smear – in six months' time.

If the repeat smear is normal, you will be asked to have one more smear test in six to twelve months' time to be sure that the cells are still healthy. If they are healthy, you will then go back to receiving routine investigations as before.

If your repeat smear still shows borderline changes or mild dyskaryosis, you may be referred to a clinic for a further examination – called colposcopy.

For some women their result will show **moderate** or **severe dyskaryosis**.

It is unlikely that you have cancer. However, these changes are less likely to return to normal by themselves and usually need treatment.

To decide whether you need treatment, a further examination – called colposcopy – is carried out to investigate the cervix in detail.

It is important that these changes are checked now, in case they become more serious in the future.

WHAT IS COLPOSCOPY?

This is a simple examination at a colposcopy clinic that allows the doctor to decide if you need treatment.

An instrument called a colposcope is used – it is just a magnifying glass which lets the doctor look more closely at the changes on your cervix. It does not go inside you, but some women may find the examination a bit uncomfortable.

If you need colposcopy, make sure you receive the leaflet NHS Cervical Screening: The colposcopy examination.

WHAT ABOUT TREATMENT?

If you need treatment following colposcopy you will usually be treated as an out-patient and there will be no need for you to stay in hospital. Treatment is nearly always 100 per cent successful.

WHAT FOLLOW-UP WILL I NEED?

After treatment you will need regular check-ups to make sure that the cervix is healthy again. You will need annual smears for the next four or five years.

WHAT ABOUT SEX?

Some women worry that having sex will make the problem worse and abnormal cells could be passed on to their partners. Sex does not make the abnormality worse and you cannot pass on abnormal cells.

Enjoy sex as usual, but you should use an effective contraceptive. It is important not to get pregnant until your abnormality is dealt with, as the hormones produced during pregnancy make treatment more difficult.

If you have treatment it will have little or no effect on your future fertility, nor on your risk of having a miscarriage.

WHAT CAUSES AN ABNORMAL RESULT?

Changes in the cells of the cervix are often associated with certain types of a virus which can be transmitted by sexual intercourse. The virus is called the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). HPV often shows no symptoms. It is therefore possible that you may have had the virus for many years without knowing about it, or a partner may have been infected many years ago and, again, not known.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you have any further questions regarding your condition or if you feel worried at all, do not hesitate to phone or make an appointment with your GP or your gynaecologist who will be happy to talk to you.

SUMMARY

- It is not unusual to have an abnormal smear. About one in ten women have an abnormal smear test result.
- Nearly all abnormal smears show no more than small changes in the cells on the cervix. These changes would probably never develop into cancer.
- Treatment, if needed, is simply and virtually 100 per cent effective. You will usually be treated as an out-patient. Once healing is completed, you should not be physically affected in any way.
- You can have sex within a few weeks of treatment.
- Having an abnormal smear and treatment does not affect your ability to have children.