

Colposcopy and Cervical Treatment

This information leaflet tells you about investigating abnormal cervical smears using colposcopy and how they can be treated.

An associated leaflet, “The Cervical Screening Test: Your Results Explained” gives more detail about having an abnormal smear. You may have received a copy with your smear test results. If not, please scan the QR code or visit the link below for more information or request a copy from your GP practice or sexual health clinic.



<https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/your-smear-test-results/>



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What is a colposcopy?

A colposcopy is a procedure to find out whether there are abnormal cells on or in a person's cervix or vagina. The cervix is the part of the womb that sits in the vagina. A colposcopist (a trained doctor or nurse) will examine your cervix using a microscope. It looks like a pair of binoculars on a stand. The colposcope stays outside your body.

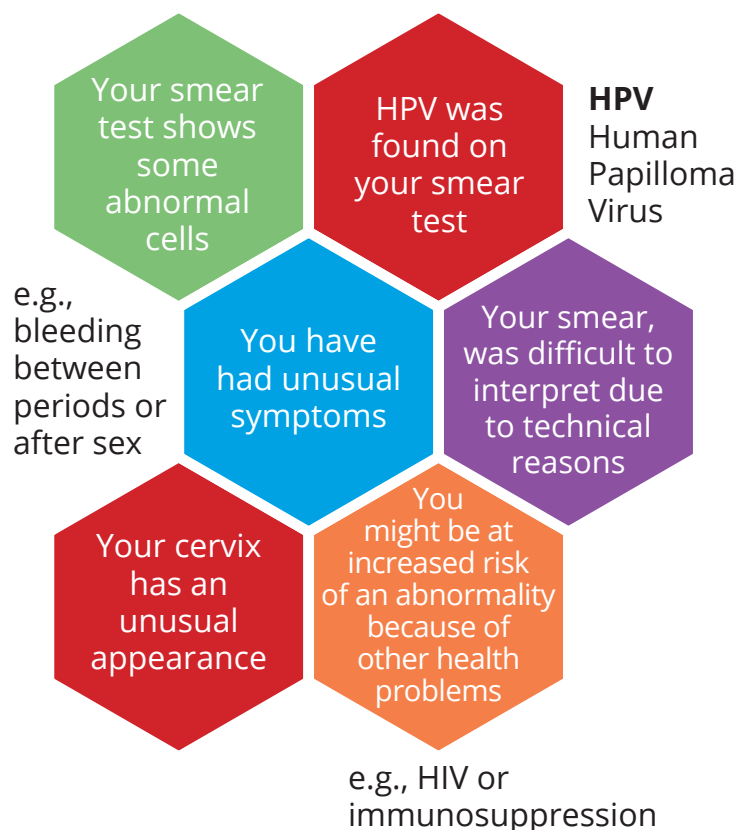
In some people, the presence of 'abnormal cells' carries the risk of developing cervical cancer. A colposcopy is used to determine whether treatment will be needed to deal with these cells.



Why have I been referred for a colposcopy?

You may be referred for a colposcopy for the following reasons:

- Your smear test shows some abnormal cells.
- Human Papillomavirus (HPV) was found on your smear test.
- You have had several cervical screening tests with unclear results.
- Your smear test was difficult to interpret due to technical reasons.
- The nurse or doctor who carried out your screening thought your cervix didn't look as healthy as it should, or it has an unusual appearance.
- You have had unusual symptoms, such as unexplained vaginal bleeding (for example, after sex or between periods).
- You might be at increased risk of an abnormality due to other health conditions, such as HIV or immunosuppression.



What causes an abnormal smear?

We do not know exactly what causes an abnormal smear, but it can be associated with the Human Papillomavirus (HPV). People who smoke are also more likely to have abnormal smear results. Smoking can change the ability of cervical cells to protect themselves, making the cervix more at risk and less able to fight off disease.

If you would like more information or support on stopping smoking, please read the section titled "More Information About Smoking".

What is HPV?

HPV stands for Human Papillomavirus. It is a wart virus which is very common. Anyone who has ever had intimate sexual contact is likely to have been exposed to HPV at some point. HPV rarely causes any symptoms, and in most people the virus clears itself.

For more information on HPV, please visit this NHS page:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/human-papilloma-virus-hpv/>



Getting ready

Do I Need to Make Any Special Preparations or Arrangements Before My Appointment?

You don't need to make any special preparations before attending the clinic, but if you have any specific concerns, it may be helpful to speak to your GP. You might consider the following:

- Eat something before you arrive to ensure you feel comfortable during the appointment.
- It is best not to make an appointment for dental treatment on the same day as your colposcopy. This is because if you need treatment at the colposcopy clinic, you will be given local anaesthetic, and you should not have two doses of anaesthetic on the same day.
- If you have your period at the time of your first appointment, you should still attend the colposcopy clinic, as the examination and treatment can still be carried out during your period.
- Don't have sex or use vaginal medications, lubricants, creams, or tampons for at least 24 hours before your appointment to make the examination easier.
- If you are pregnant, please tell the specialist - colposcopy will not harm your baby.
- If you have a coil (IUD), it may have to be removed if treatment is required. In that case, you must use an alternative form of contraception (for example, a condom) for at least seven days before your appointment in case you require treatment.
- If you receive treatment during your visit, it's a good idea to rest for a few hours afterward. Consider taking the rest of the day off work, and if you have small children, arrange for someone to care for them so you can rest if needed.

- If you would particularly prefer to be seen by a female clinician, please contact the clinic as soon as you receive your appointment. It is not guaranteed that a female clinician will be available, and your appointment may need to be rearranged depending on availability.
- You are welcome to bring your partner, a relative, or a friend to the clinic for support and to accompany you home afterward. If possible, it is best not to bring small children.
- If you need an interpreter, please inform the clinic as soon as possible so they can arrange one in your preferred language.

At your appointment

What Will Happen on My First Visit to the Colposcopy Clinic?

Arrival:

It's a good idea to check your appointment time and location, leaving plenty of time to get there so you do not feel rushed. When you arrive, the receptionist may check a few details such as your age and address. Usually, they will then ask you to have a seat in the waiting room until the nurse calls you.

Before the Examination:

The specialist will ask for some medical details and explain why you are at the clinic, how you will be examined, and—if necessary—how they plan to treat you. You will always be asked for your consent for any treatment you are offered.

You will be asked to step behind a curtain and remove your clothing from the waist down, including your underwear. If you prefer, you could wear a loose skirt that can be lifted up without having to take it off. Once undressed, the nurse will ask you to lie on a couch and will cover your legs

with a sheet. Your legs will be supported in leg rests so that the specialist can see your cervix easily.

The nurse will stand beside you all the time, and they or the specialist can explain everything as you are examined.

The examination

Just like at your cervical screening, the specialist will insert a speculum into your vagina (the passage leading to your womb). This is the same instrument used during a smear test. The specialist may take another smear test before having a closer look at your cervix using the colposcope, a machine that magnifies the view of your cervix from the outside. The colposcope does not enter your body. To show up any abnormal cells, the specialist will apply liquid solutions to your cervix. In some people, the cervix is normal and requires no treatment.

Taking a biopsy

If the specialist sees any abnormal cells or needs to investigate further, they may take a biopsy. This means taking one or more tiny pieces of skin from your cervix and sending them to the laboratory for examination. Some people feel a nip when this is taken, but others hardly feel anything.

If a biopsy is taken, you may have a little bleeding or discharge for a day or two. We suggest that you do not have sex and tampons for a couple of days to allow the area to heal.

At your clinic visit, the specialist will explain how you will receive your biopsy results and discuss any further treatment that may be required. If the colposcopy confirms the presence of abnormal cells, treatment may be offered immediately.

What does treatment involve if needed?

If treatment is needed during your first colposcopy appointment, it is typically carried out in the outpatient clinic and is both simple and very effective. The aim of the treatment is to remove or destroy all the abnormal cells on your cervix.

You will be given a local anaesthetic in your cervix. Some people do not feel this being given, but others feel a pricking sensation or discomfort. The cervix absorbs the anaesthetic quickly, so it will be numb before the treatment begins.

The most common form of treatment in Lothian is loop excision, where the abnormal cells are removed using a small, heated wire loop. The cells which are removed go to the pathology laboratory for testing.



If treatment is required, the specialist will explain the procedure and discuss your options. You do not have to have treatment that day if you would like to have time to think about things.

How long is the visit?

The initial examination takes about 15 minutes, but the first visit may last longer (20–30 minutes), especially if you have treatment. In total, you should expect to spend about an hour in the clinic. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, your visit could take up to two hours. It's a good idea to plan ahead when arranging childcare, taking time off work, or making travel arrangements.

What happens after treatment?

After your treatment, you will be offered a drink and can sit in the waiting room until you feel ready to leave. Staff will go over after care advice, and you can ask any further questions you may have.

You may have a period-like pain after your treatment. You might have also a watery or blood-stained discharge for two to four weeks while your cervix heals. Use sanitary towels (not tampons) and do not have sex until the discharge has stopped. Avoid baths and swimming in this time as well. If you have any unusual heavy bleeding in the first two days after treatment, contact your GP practice or the colposcopy clinic for advice.

If after 8–10 days you have heavy bleeding (other than your period), or if the discharge becomes thick and very smelly, contact your GP practice to make sure you do not have an infection. In most cases, a short course of antibiotics is all that's needed to treat an infection.

Recovery

Reactions to treatment can vary. Some people may feel tired, while others can resume normal activities. Rest as needed and take paracetamol for pain if necessary. Avoid strenuous exercise and swimming until the discharge has stopped.

Will I need any follow-up?

Most patients are discharged immediately after their colposcopy appointment and treatment.

- **If No Abnormalities Are Found:** The specialist will refer you back to your GP for a smear test in six months. You may also be scheduled for more frequent smears

over the next four years, depending on your most recent results.

- **If You Have Treatment:** You will need a smear test in six months at your GP practice to ensure all abnormal cells have been removed and your cervix has healed. In some cases, additional smears or a repeat colposcopy may be advised based on the type of abnormality treated. Your specialist will provide specific guidance.
- **Importance of Follow-Up:** It is crucial to attend follow-up appointments, as abnormalities can recur.

What about sex?

• **Post-Treatment:**

The specialist will advise you not to have sex until the treated area on your cervix has healed and the discharge has stopped. This can take between two and four weeks. After this, your sex life should not be affected.

• **Important Reminder:**

Bleeding between periods or after sex may not be normal. Be sure to inform your GP or a sexual health doctor if you experience this.

What about contraception?

- **If You Are on the Pill:** Continue taking it as normal.
- **If You Have a Coil (IUD):** It may have to be removed at your first visit if treatment is required. In this case, you'll need to use an additional form of contraception. You can arrange to have a new coil inserted at your GP or a sexual health clinic about 6 weeks to six months after treatment.
- **If You Use Other Contraceptive Methods:** You can start using them once the discharge has stopped. Barrier methods, such as condoms or a cap, may help protect your cervix from infection.

What about pregnancy after treatment?

Treatment should not affect your ability to become pregnant in the future. Some studies suggest a slight association between repeated colposcopy treatment and an increased risk of early labour or late miscarriage in some patients. If you have had treatment, you must inform your obstetrician (pregnancy doctor) or midwife during any future pregnancies. You can then be assessed and monitored more closely, if necessary.

More information about smoking

Smoking can weaken the cervix's ability to protect itself, increasing the risk of disease. While it may be a challenging time to quit smoking, support is available to help you:

- **At Your Appointment:** The doctor or nurse can discuss the risks of continued smoking and the benefits of stopping.
- **Referral to Stop Smoking Services:** The doctor or nurse can refer you to a local stop smoking service.

You can also reach out to a stop smoking team directly (Quit Your Way Scotland Adviser: Call **0800 84 84 84**), who can discuss options like nicotine replacement therapy or other medications. For more information on local support, search "stop smoking" on the NHS inform website (Local help to stop smoking | NHS inform).

Support to use our services

- **Interpreter Services:** If English is not your first language, you are entitled to an interpreter at medical consultations. Please inform the clinic as soon as possible about your need for an interpreter and your language preference.

- **Minority Ethnic Health Inclusion Service (MEHIS):** MEHIS provides advocates to assist minority ethnic individuals during medical consultations. Advocates can help you understand health information, treatment details, and communicate your needs. Contact MEHIS in advance at **0131 536 9544** or visit MEHIS.
- **Deaf and Communication Support:** If you are Deaf and require a sign language interpreter or other communication support, please notify the clinic as soon as possible. You can also contact Deaf Action:
 - > Phone: **0131 556 3128**
 - > WhatsApp (text or video call): **07775 620 757**
 - > Email: admin@deafaction.org
- **Special Assistance:** If you require special arrangements due to mobility issues or other disabilities, please contact the clinic before your visit to discuss the support you need.

Further information

The NHS Lothian Library and Resource Centre offers relevant books and videos on cervical screening, including some in different languages. You can reach out to them at **0131 536 9451/2/3** or email resource.centre@nhs.scot.

After your treatment, you can obtain an additional leaflet titled **"The Cervical Screening Test: Information for Women After Treatment for Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia (CIN) at a Colposcopy Clinic."**

For more detailed information, visit the British Society for Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology's website at www.bsccp.org.uk.

You can also find easy-read information about colposcopy at the following link: [Easy Read Colposcopy Information](#).

For additional information, visit the NHS inform website: **Colposcopy - Tests & treatments | NHS inform**.