

# Colposcopy Examination

for the management of difficult to obtain cervical cytology tests and negative cytology in the presence of High Risk HPV Infection

Colposcopy Service  
Patient information



## Why have I been referred to the Colposcopy Clinic?

- Your cervical screening test has been reported as inadequate.
- Your GP has difficulty obtaining a cervical screening sample.
- Your cervical screening test has shown some normal or 'negative' cells; but tested positive for the High-risk HPV infection.

### Inadequate cervical screening tests

You have been asked to attend the colposcopy clinic because your last cervical screening test was unsatisfactory. This means that it has not been possible to get a reliable result from your screening test and does not necessarily mean that there is anything wrong with your cervix. Inadequate screening tests are fairly common for a number of reasons, for example:

- Your GP or practice nurse might not have been able to fully see the cervix to obtain a good sample.
- Scanty Cellularity. This means that there are too few cells for the laboratory to make an opinion. This is quite common, particularly in women who have stopped having periods as the cervix shrinks and produces less cells as women get older (post menopausal).
- Too few well preserved cells.
- Hormonal changes during pregnancy or after delivery (postnatal)
- Inflammatory changes or infections.

Even though there may be nothing wrong with your cervix it is important that we see you in the colposcopy clinic to take your cervical screening test under special lighting and, if necessary, to examine your cervix more closely with a colposcope.

## Difficulty obtaining a cervical screening sample

At times the cervix can be difficult to visualise. This can be caused by the uterus being 'tilted', which is entirely normal. Previous abdominal or vaginal surgery can also result in the cervix being difficult to locate. In the colposcopy clinic there are special couches and instruments that can be used to obtain the cervical screening sample without too much difficulty.

### What is HPV?

HPV is a very common virus - most people will be infected with it at some point in their life. It can be passed on through skin to skin contact, usually during sexual activity with a man or woman. There are many different types of HPV but these are all split into 2 groups known as High risk HPV types and Low risk HPV types. High risk HPV types can lead to the cause of cervical cancer in some but not all women.

The types of HPV which cause cervical cancer can infect your cervix without causing any symptoms at all. In most cases, your immune system can get rid of the virus without you ever knowing you had it. But sometimes, HPV infections can cause cells in your cervix to become abnormal or pre-cancerous. Not all pre-cancerous cell changes need immediate treatment. Some low-grade pre-cancerous cells (CIN1) will get better on their own without the need for treatment. Some pre-cancerous cells, usually high-grade

(CIN2-3) are treated very successfully in the colposcopy clinic. Unfortunately it is not possible to treat HPV infections, but the virus is likely to respond to a healthy immune system. Eating healthy foods, taking regular exercise, reducing alcohol intake and not smoking will help your immune system to get rid of the virus.

## What is a colposcope?

A colposcope is a specially adapted type of microscope with a high powered light source. It looks a bit like a pair of binoculars on a stand. The colposcope does not touch you or go inside you but allows the colposcopist to look at your cervix under magnification.

## What happens when I come to the colposcopy clinic?

- A female nurse will be with you throughout your visit but you can choose to bring a friend or relative with you if you wish.
- The doctor or nurse in clinic will ask you some questions relating to your periods, the type of contraception you use, any operations or illnesses etc and will explain your previous screening test result with you in more detail before you are examined.
- We recommend that you wear a skirt or dress to avoid removing all your lower clothing before the examination, however modesty sheets are also provided in the clinic.

## What exactly happens during the examination?

- The nurse will help you to position yourself on a special type of couch, which has supports to rest your legs on.
- When you are comfortable the nurse or colposcopist will gently insert a speculum into your vagina (just the same as when you had your last screening test) and will look carefully at your cervix. The cervical screening test will then be taken. Sometimes this is all we need to do.

However, sometimes it is also necessary to examine your cervix more closely using the colposcope. This will be done if your GP or practice nurse is concerned about the appearance of your cervix, or if you have had a test which shows normal (negative) cervical cells with a high-risk HPV infection detected in the sample.

- The colposcopist will dab different liquids onto your cervix to help identify and highlight various types of cells. If any abnormal areas are seen a small sample of tissue (biopsy) will be taken from the skin of the cervix.

## Cervical punch biopsies

To help the doctor or nurse to make an accurate diagnosis of your condition it is usual to take a small sample of tissue from your cervix called a biopsy. If you have a small biopsy taken, you will have a discoloured discharge from the solutions used and some light bleeding from the biopsy site. Some women may also experience crampy abdominal pain which may feel like period pain. You may wish to take the rest of the day off work if you feel uncomfortable.

We recommend using some mild pain relief, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen during the next 24 hours to help alleviate these symptoms. As the discharge will take a few days to gradually clear up, it is advisable to avoid sexual intercourse, using tampons and swimming. This is to help prevent any risk of infection, although you may still take baths and showers as usual, avoiding bubble bath and talcum powder.

It takes approximately four to six weeks to obtain your results. We will write to you and your doctor to confirm your results and your plan of care.

## What happens after the examination?

After you have dressed, the colposcopist or nurse will usually be able to give you a good indication whether there is anything wrong with your cervix. However, it is not always possible to give you a definite diagnosis until we get the results of any tests and/or investigations that have been carried out.

## Please remember ...

The cervical screening test is not a test to detect cancer. It is designed to detect changes in the cervix (neck of the womb) at a very early stage so that appropriate treatment can be given to prevent cancer from developing.

Also remember that 'unsatisfactory' or 'inadequate' screening tests are not the same as abnormal tests. Human papilloma virus testing known as HPV will be undertaken on all screening samples from 2019. If your cervical screening sample includes an HPV test which is high-risk HPV positive; this does not necessarily mean that you will have abnormal cells on your cervix. The virus is very common. Most people will have come into contact with the virus at some point. The HPV itself cannot be treated; but if the virus has caused some abnormal cells to develop on your cervix, the abnormal cells are very treatable. Abnormal cells on the cervix are diagnosed by undertaking the colposcopy examination.

It is very important that you attend the Colposcopy Clinic when any appointment is made for you. If you cannot attend, for any reason, please let us know so the appointment time can be used by someone else and we can arrange another appointment for you.

We hope that you have found the information in this leaflet helpful. If you require any further advice regarding any aspect

of your care please do not hesitate to ask the clinic staff. They are there to support you and are happy to help with any concerns or anxieties.

**You can also contact a Nurse Colposcopist via the Nurse Advice Lines - it is advisable to contact the hospital you have been referred to.**

- For James Cook University Hospital, Middlesbrough:  
**01642 282790**
- For the Friarage Hospital, Northallerton:  
**01609 764692**

(There is a 24-hour answer-phone service if they are unable to answer your call immediately).

If you are unable to attend a clinic and wish to change your appointment, please contact our clerical staff;

- The James Cook University Hospital – Tel: 01642 282790
- The Friarage Hospital – Tel: 01609 764813

**Please note:** Both The James Cook University Hospital and the Friarage Hospital are teaching centres, therefore you may be asked permission for observers to be present throughout your appointment. If you would rather not be observed please inform a member of staff.

## Useful web sites for further information

- [www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervica](http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervica)
- [www.informedchoiceaboutcancerscreening.org](http://www.informedchoiceaboutcancerscreening.org)
- [www.cruk.org](http://www.cruk.org)
- [www.jostrust.org.uk](http://www.jostrust.org.uk)
- [www.healthtalkonline.org](http://www.healthtalkonline.org)

As South Tees Hospitals NHS Trust have not personally produced the websites listed above we therefore cannot accept any liability for their content.

## Comments, compliments, concerns or complaints

South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is concerned about the quality of care you receive and strives to maintain high standards of health care.

However we do appreciate that there may be an occasion where you, or your family, feel dissatisfied with the standard of service you receive. Please do not hesitate to tell us about your concerns as this helps us to learn from your experience and to improve services for future patients.

## Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

This service aims to advise and support patients, families and carers and help sort out problems quickly on your behalf.

This service is available, and based, at The James Cook University Hospital but also covers the Friarage Hospital in Northallerton, our community hospitals and community health services. Please ask a member of staff for further information.

If you require this information in a different format please contact Freephone 0800 0282451

Author: Colposcopy Service

---

**The James Cook University Hospital**

**Marton Road, Middlesbrough, TS4 3BW. Tel: 01642 850850**

**Friarage Hospital**

**Bullamoor Road, Northallerton, DL6 1JG. Tel: 01609 779911**

Version 5, Issue Date: December 2018, Revision Date: December 2020