

Frequently asked questions: Cervical screening

Cervical cancer is on track to be eliminated in Australia by 2030 due to the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination program and the changes to the National Cervical Screening Program.

All women and people with a cervix aged 25 to 74 who have ever had a sexual partner should have a Cervical Screening Test every five years, even if they are no longer sexually active. Cervical cancer screening can help detect cervical cancer at its earliest stage.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, people living with a disability, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people who identify as LGBTIQ+ and people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage have a higher risk of late-stage cancer diagnosis, have poorer survival outcomes and higher mortality rates. These groups tend to participate in screening and cancer prevention programs at lower rates than the rest of the Victorian population.

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is a type of cancer that develops in the cervix – the entrance to the womb from the vagina. It happens when there are changes in some cells lining the cervix. Sometimes these abnormal cells grow and multiply and can develop into cancer.

What is a Cervical Screening Test?

Cervical screening is a test at a health service after consultation with your doctor, nurse or health worker. The Cervical Screening Test detects human papillomavirus (HPV) infection. HPV is a key risk factor in the development of cervical cancer. Even if you are vaccinated against HPV you need to participate in regular cervical screening.

Who should have a Cervical Screening Test?

Women or people with a cervix who:

- are aged 25 to 74 years old
- are sexually active or sexually active in the past
- have had the HPV vaccination or not
- have been through menopause
- have been with only one sexual partner
- have experienced traditional cutting or circumcision
- are no longer sexually active
- have had a baby
- are pregnant (make sure you let your doctor know)
- have had a full or partial hysterectomy – please check with your doctor about screening.

If you have never been sexually active, you do not need to have a Cervical Screening Test.

What is the National Cervical Screening Program?

The National Cervical Screening Program aims to prevent cervical cancer with regular screening. The National Cervical Screening Program changed in 2017 to improve early detection and save more lives.

If your Medicare details are correct, women and people with a cervix aged 25 to 74 years of age are invited/reminded to have a Cervical Screening Test every 5 years, instead of a Pap test every two years. The Cervical Screening Test looks for human papillomavirus (HPV).

Even if you are vaccinated against HPV you need to participate in regular cervical screening. Women and people with a cervix of any age who have symptoms such as unusual bleeding, discharge or pain should see their doctor immediately, regardless of when they were last screened. You can ask for a female doctor or use the [Cervical Screening Directory](#) to choose a nurse cervical screening provider.

What is the difference between a Cervical Screening Test and a Pap test?

The Cervical Screening Test replaced the Pap test in 2017. The Pap test used to look for cell changes in the cervix. The new test looks for HPV (a common infection spread during sexual activity) which can lead to those cell changes. It is expected it will protect up to 30% more people.

Is five years too long to wait between screens?

The time between getting an infection and the infection perhaps turning into cervical cancer is very long. Infections with HPV are common in young people, but cervical cancer does not become common until women are in their 30s, 40s or 50s. So even if you were infected the day after your HPV test, it is extremely unlikely that it could progress to cancer within five years.

It is very likely your body's immune system would clear the virus itself in that timeframe, but if it does not, it will be picked up at your next screening test.

Why do I need to wait until I am 25?

A common concern among young Victorians is the new age range for cervical screening, as previously cervical screening started at age 18.

Research shows us that having a five-yearly Cervical Screening Test from the age of 25 is safer and more effective than having a two-yearly Pap test from the age of 18.

Cervical cancer is extremely rare in women and people with a cervix under 25 – there are around 10–15 cases of cervical cancer in people under 25 in Australia each year from a total number of around 900 cases.

Since the HPV Vaccination Program was introduced in 2007, the number of cervical abnormalities among people with a cervix aged younger than 25 has been dropping, resulting in fewer cases of cervical cancer in this age group.

The combined approach of the vaccine and a more effective cervical screening program is protecting our young generations from the risk of cervical cancer.

What is the human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is a common virus that is spread through sexual contact. HPV infection can be serious. It can cause cancers, including cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, penis and anus, and some head and neck cancers. HPV types 16 and 18 cause up to 80% of the cervical cancers and up to 90% of HPV-related cancers in men.¹

There is an HPV vaccine. The HPV vaccine will prevent up to 90% of cervical cancers. The vaccine is most effective if given before the start of sexual activity. It is currently offered to children in Year 7 as part of the school-based National Immunisation Program. People outside of these ages may still benefit from the vaccine and should speak to their doctors to see if it is right for them.

As the vaccine will not prevent all cervical cancers, it is important to remember that, vaccinated or not, a Cervical Screening Test every five years is still vitally important for all women and people with a cervix, aged 25 to 74, who have ever been sexually active.

What is self-collection?

Self-collection is when a woman or person with a cervix takes their own vaginal sample using a swab. This test is done privately at the doctor's or other health setting and is usually done behind a screen or in the bathroom. It is easy and accurate and gives you more control over the process.

As of 1 July 2022, all women and people with a cervix will have the choice to use the self-collection method. That means that all people eligible for a Cervical Screening Test will be able to collect their own sample from 1 July 2022. For more information on self-collection speak to your doctor or nurse cervical screening provider.

What is this like for women and people with a cervix who have experienced sexual assault?

We know cervical screening is different for everyone. Some women and people with a cervix who have a history of sexual assault may be reminded of the experience by gynaecological procedures such as the Cervical Screening Test and may avoid regular cervical screening.

Our brochure [Cervical screening after sexual assault](#) provides helpful information for those impacted by sexual assault.

Our [Cervical Screening Directory](#) allows you to search for a sexual assault sensitive provider.

What is this like for women who have experienced traditional cutting?

We know that cervical screening is different for everyone. The experience of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), sometimes known as traditional cutting, can sometimes prevent people from getting a Cervical Screening Test.

Our brochure [Cervical screening is important for all women](#) provides helpful information for those impacted by traditional cutting.

Our [Cervical Screening Directory](#) allows you to search for a traditional cutting sensitive provider.

¹ [Australian Department of Health, HPV \(Human papillomavirus\)](#)

Do you need a cervical screen if you had a hysterectomy?

Some patients who have had a hysterectomy may need to keep having Cervical Screening Tests. It depends on the type of hysterectomy, the reason for the hysterectomy, and the patient's cervical screening history prior to the hysterectomy. You will still need regular Cervical Screening Tests if you have a cervix (if you had a sub-total hysterectomy or partial hysterectomy).

People without a cervix (who had a total hysterectomy) may still need follow-up tests (using a cell sample taken from the top of the vagina) if you:

- have not been screened before
- had a hysterectomy as part of treatment for high-grade cervical abnormalities
- are under surveillance for a previous high-grade cervical abnormality
- have cervical abnormalities detected during your hysterectomy.

If you have had a hysterectomy, ask your doctor whether you still need to have cervical screening.

What about culturally and linguistically diverse communities?

People from culturally and linguistically diverse communities face numerous challenges in cancer prevention, screening and early diagnosis, as well as access to appropriate treatment. Some of the barriers to cancer screening are:

- lack of knowledge of the availability, purpose, importance and benefits of screening
- belief that screening is unnecessary if they experience no symptoms of ill health
- negative cultural perceptions about cancer – for example fatalistic attitudes (i.e. cancer is the will of God, cancer is incurable, cancer is predetermined)
- fear, shame and stigma associated with cancer
- fear and embarrassment around the test
- language, communication and literacy difficulties
- availability of female doctors or doctors from similar communities or that speak their language
- other competing priorities such as employment, housing and family (particularly, newly arrived migrants)

We recommend that everyone who has a cervix participates in the National Cervical Screening Program. Speak to your doctor or nurse cervical screening provider for more information.

What is it like for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities?

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people may experience unique barriers in cervical screening which can include:

- shame, fear and embarrassment about screening and cancer
- distrust of doctors, mainstream providers and government services
- lack of culturally sensitive and appropriate health services
- lack of Indigenous and female doctors
- cultural perceptions around cancer
- lack of access to health services
- low knowledge of the importance and benefits of cancer screening
- prioritisation of family needs before health
- lack of Indigenous-specific, culturally relevant educational resources e.g. speaking posters, as very few local Central Australian languages are written or read.

What is it like for people who are part of the LGBTIQ+ community to do cervical screening?

The following barriers have been identified as common for people who identify as lesbian, bisexual or are same-sex attracted, and people who identify as transgender and have a cervix.

- misconception by patients and health care providers that lesbian, bisexual and same-sex attracted women, and transgender men who have a cervix, are not at risk of HPV and cervical cancer (i.e. belief that cervical screening is not necessary)
- discrimination and social stigma
- fear of negative attitudes from healthcare providers
- high levels of psychological distress, experiences of trauma and abuse
- healthcare providers' lack of understanding about sexual and gender diversity
- difficulty finding a suitable healthcare provider (i.e. accepting, empathetic, non-judgemental)
- previous negative experiences with doctors or healthcare services
- reluctance to disclose sexual orientation/identity
- potential distress for transgender patients caused by the conflict between their sex assigned at birth (i.e. female) and their gender identify (i.e. male)
- transgender men with a cervix may find speculum examinations painful.

We recommend that everyone who has a cervix participates in the National Cervical Screening Program. Speak to your doctor or nurse cervical screening provider for more information.

What is this like for people with disabilities?

We know that cervical screening is different for everyone. Some people with disabilities may face barriers which make cervical screening harder to do.

These barriers may include:

- clinic accessibility
- physical limitations
- competing health needs
- informed consent.

A doctor, nurse or health professional can provide individual advice to help overcome some of these barriers.

Our [Cervical Screening Directory](#) allows you to search for a cervical screening provider who has disability access such as hoist, ramp, adjustable bed, etc.

We recommend that everyone who has a cervix participates in the National Cervical Screening Program. Speak to your doctor or nurse cervical screening provider for more information.

Is it safe to screen during COVID-19?

Amidst public concern about the risk of COVID-19 infection, it is understandable that Victorians may be anxious about visiting their doctor or attending follow-up appointments.

There is increasing concerns that people with signs of cancer, and other health conditions, may not be contacting their doctors to discuss new symptoms. This delay could mean people present later with more complicated and progressed cancer, making treatment options more challenging.

Health services have implemented infection control and doctors are doing all they can to ensure it is safe to attend appointments if you need to.

Other medical issues don't stop because of COVID-19. Don't delay medical appointments, as symptoms being investigated promptly might just save your life.

During what is already a difficult time, it is vitally important that people look after their health. Early detection of all cancers is an important factor for treatment and outcomes.

What if my results come back positive for HPV infection?

If the Cervical Screening Test shows HPV is present, it does not mean it is cervical cancer. A HPV infection can take 10 to 15 years to cause cell changes, which may eventually lead to cervical cancer. If the test comes back positive with a high-grade result, further investigations are needed. This usually includes a colposcopy performed by a specialist. A colposcopy is a procedure used to look closely at the cervix, vagina and vulva to help locate changed or abnormal cells and see what they look like.

If the test comes back positive with a low-grade result, you may be required for a repeat test in 12 months to see if the body's immune system has cleared the infection naturally.

The repeat test checks if the infection has gone and if so, it is safe to return to a five-yearly screening. If the repeat test shows the HPV infection is still present, you may be advised to do another repeat test in another 12 months or be referred to a specialist for further investigations.

It is important to follow the advice of your GP. For further information on a colposcopy please see [The plain facts: Having a colposcopy](#).

How much does it cost?

The Cervical Screening Test is free for many eligible women and people with a cervix aged 25 to 74. However, your doctor or nurse cervical screening provider may charge a small fee. If you choose a bulk billing clinic there will be no out-of-pocket-expenses and therefore no cost to you for the test. If you do not have your appointment with a bulk billing clinic, you may be asked to pay the full fee for your consultation. You will then need to claim the rebate from Medicare. It is important to ask about the cost of your Cervical Screening Test when you book your appointment.

How do I find a Cervical Screening Test provider?

There are many Cervical Screening Test providers in Victoria. Check our [Cervical Screening Directory](#) to find a provider near you.

You can talk to your doctor, nurse or other health care professional about Cervical Screening Tests.

If you need cancer information and support, contact our cancer nurses on **13 11 20**.

Helpful websites

Cancer Council Victoria

www.cancervic.org.au/preventing-cancer/attend-screening/cervical-screening

Cancer Council Victoria's Cancer Screening Resource Hub

www.screeningresources.cancervic.org.au/resources

National Cervical Screening Program

www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/national-cervical-screening-program

Cervical Screening Test Providers in Victoria

www.cancervic.org.au/cervical-screening-test/where.asp