

Smear Testing

The Health Authority runs a recall system and our nurses do most of the routine smears. We are now using the new and more accurate liquid based sampling technique.

The cells at the neck of the womb, or cervix, are vulnerable to a common sexually-transmitted virus called Human Papilloma Virus. This is also known as HPV, or 'wart virus'. This virus may alter the cells so that they become pre-cancerous, or even cancerous. This process usually takes many years, and so testing the cells by taking a sample, from the neck of the womb, allows early changes to be detected and treated before cancer develops.

The NHS offers smear tests every three years for women aged between twenty four and a half and fifty, and five yearly till sixty-five. The health authority sends invitations to all eligible women. If a previous smear has been abnormal, you may be recalled for your next smear after a shorter interval, for instance, six months or one year.

When you have a smear, the nurse or doctor will ask you to lie on the examination couch and will insert an instrument called a speculum into the vagina. This is opened to allow a view of the cervix at the top of the vagina. The smear is then taken by sweeping a special brush over the surface of the cervix, taking off a few sample cells with it.

The sample is then put into a pot of preservative liquid and sent to St. George's Hospital for analysis. You will get a letter from the hospital after about three weeks with a coded indication of your result. The codes used are:

- A. Your smear is normal and you should have the next one in three years.
- B. Your smear is unsatisfactory in some way and you should ring and speak to the practice nurse for further information.
- C. Your smear is technically unsatisfactory, and needs to be repeated. This may happen if too few cells are obtained, but the new liquid technology should overcome this problem.

If there are changes in the cells which might be pre-cancerous, you may be invited to a further examination by a hospital gynaecologist. This is called a colposcopy, and is like a smear test except that the doctor uses a microscope to see your cervix under higher magnification and may take a small biopsy.