

Treating Abnormal Smears

A Quick Guide

Contents

This is a brief summary of 'Treating abnormal smears' from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. In this information there are sections on

- Abnormal smear test results and treatment
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You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

Abnormal smear test results

If you have an abnormal cervical screening test result, it means that you have pre cancerous changes in the cells covering the cervix. If they are left, they could develop into cancer. If you have moderate or severe cell changes on your cervix, you will have a colposcopy. During a colposcopy, the doctor or specialist nurse looks more closely at the abnormal areas of your cervix and may take samples (biopsies). If you have mild changes, you may have a colposcopy straight away, or you may have another test in 6 months.

The NHS cervical screening programme has started to offer women with borderline or mild cell changes a test to check for the human papilloma virus (HPV). Women who have high risk types of HPV are referred to colposcopy straight away. Those who test negative to HPV continue to be monitored through the screening programme, as the cell changes are likely to return to normal on their own.

Treatment for abnormal smears

There are several different treatments available for pre cancerous changes in the cervix. They all aim to remove or destroy the abnormal cells. This can be done by freezing, with heat from a laser or hot probe, or by cutting out the affected area.

Laser ablation, cold coagulation and cryotherapy (freezing) treat just the part of the cervix that contains abnormal cells. Or you may have a cone biopsy, diathermy or LLETZ. These remove all of the area where cells can become cancerous.

Hysterectomy

If you are past your menopause or have finished having children, your doctor may suggest removing the whole of your womb (hysterectomy). This is more likely if you have had abnormal cells before, or if the abnormality found was severe.

After your abnormal smear treatment

Most women feel fine after having treatment for abnormal cervical cells. But some may feel quite ill and need to go home and rest. You may have period type pains for the rest of the day. You should expect to have some bleeding or discharge for some days after you are treated. How long it lasts depends partly on the type of treatment you have had. Many women find this type of treatment does have an emotional effect on them. You may feel traumatised, depressed, vulnerable or invaded. Usually you get over these feelings with time. But if you feel you need help you could talk to your GP about counselling.

You shouldn't have sex for 4 weeks after your treatment because of the risk of infection. Treatment will not affect your enjoyment of sex in the future. It is very important to go back to the hospital or clinic for check ups after treatment for an abnormal smear. Treatment is successful in 4 out of 5 women. But if the abnormal cells come back you will need more treatment.

What happens if abnormal cells come back

Usually you can have more laser treatment, diathermy or loop excision. You may need to have a cone biopsy. But if the abnormal cells come back more than once, or if your doctor thinks the risks are too great, you may be asked to have a hysterectomy. Your doctor will talk through all the treatment options with you at every stage, and take your wishes into account.

Pregnancy and abnormal cervical cells

We hope the following information will help put your mind at rest. But it is no substitute for talking to your own doctor. Remember that abnormal cells are pre cancerous. They are not cervical cancer.

Cervical screening tests are not usually carried out during pregnancy. But you may be asked to have one at your first antenatal appointment if you had an abnormal cervical screening test result before you became pregnant. In this situation if your smear shows abnormal cells you will not usually have any treatment during your pregnancy. Your doctor may ask you to go for a colposcopy, which won't harm the pregnancy at all. If the cells haven't gone back to normal after the birth, you can have treatment then. The abnormal cells are not likely to change much during this delay.

Pregnancy after treatment for an abnormal smear

After cone biopsy (removal of a cone shaped piece of the neck of the womb (cervix)) there is a very small chance that the cervix can become so tightly closed that sperm cannot get in. So you would not be able to get pregnant naturally. It is very unlikely that any other cervical treatments will affect your ability to get pregnant in the future.

Women who have had a cone biopsy are slightly more likely to have their babies born before 37 weeks. They are also more likely to have a baby weighing less than 2.5 kg at birth (low birthweight). There is a slightly increased risk of early birth after having a large loop excision (LLETZ- a small operation to remove abnormal cells from the neck of the womb (cervix))

Your doctor will talk through the different treatment options to remove abnormal cervical cells, and discuss any potential risks to future pregnancies.

Questions for your doctor about abnormal smears

- What treatment do I need for my abnormal cervical cells?
- Why do I need this treatment?
- Why are you recommending this particular type of treatment for me?
- Do I have a choice in the treatment I have?
- What are the side effects of these treatments?
- Are there any long term effects of these treatments?
- How long will the treatment take?
- Can I be treated as an outpatient?
- How long will it take to get over the treatment?
- What should I do to help myself get over the treatment?
- When should I have another cervical screening test?
- Should I have cervical tests more often in the future now I have had an abnormal one?
- I might be pregnant. Can I still be treated?
- Will this treatment affect pregnancy in the future?

For more information, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/about-cancer>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

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