

# SCREENING FOR CERVICAL CANCER



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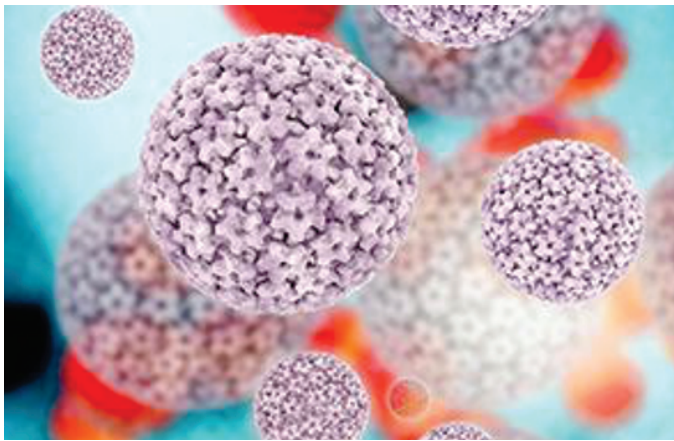


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Cervical cancer is the **second most common** cancer amongst South African women, and the **most common** amongst women aged 15 – 44 years old. The cervix is the opening to the womb.

It is estimated that every year **10 702 South African women are diagnosed** with cervical cancer and 5 870 die from this preventable disease<sup>1</sup>.

Cervical cancer is one of the only cancers that can be prevented before it develops through:

- vaccination
- AND
- screening.

Screening with the appropriate test determines if you are at risk for cervical cancer.

### What causes cervical cancer?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the cause of cervical cancer. There are 14 types of HPV, known as high-risk (HR-HPV), which can cause cervical cancer. Of these, types 16, 18 and 45 are the most important causes of cervical cancer.

HR-HPV is spread by close sexual contact. Anyone who is sexually active can get HPV, even if you have only had sex with one other person, as infection is very common – 80% of women worldwide will be infected at some point in their lives. The majority of women will clear the infection on their own, but a portion of women will not clear the infection and they are at risk for developing cancer.



### How do I know if I am at risk for cervical cancer?

Most women know about the Pap smear. The Pap smear looks for abnormal cells that may become cancer or that are already cancer. Unfortunately, the Pap smear may miss these abnormal cells. For this reason the Pap smear needs to be repeated every 2 – 3 years. The Pap smear also does not identify that you are at risk for developing cervical cancer until there are already abnormalities.

It makes much more sense to look for the cause of cervical cancer – HR-HPV. If you are not infected with HR-HPV, you are not at risk for developing cervical cancer and do not need to screen again for 3 – 5 years.

It is recommended that women **≥ 25 years old** have an HPV Test:

- If the test is negative, you do not need to test again for 5 years.
- If the test is positive for type 16, 18 or 45 you should see a gynaecologist for further investigations.
- If the test is positive for one of the other HR-HPV types, you should have a Pap smear to determine if there are abnormal cells present.

A positive test for HR-HPV does not mean that you have cancer or that you will get cancer, but it does mean that you are at risk and require more testing by your doctor.

Women who are sexually active and < 25 years old should have a Pap smear rather than testing for HR-HPV. This is because many women under the age of 25 years will have an HPV infection that will clear on its own.



### Sample options for HPV testing

1. A liquid-based cytology (LBC) sample collected by a trained healthcare worker is the best sample for screening. It can be used for both an HPV test and a Pap smear.
2. Self-sampling brushes. Many women avoid screening for cervical cancer as they feel uncomfortable having someone else take a sample or don't have time for a doctor's appointment. Self-sampling brushes are now available for you to collect your own sample for HPV testing. These can be collected from and dropped off at certain Lancet Laboratories depots. Visit [www.lancet.co.za](http://www.lancet.co.za) to locate the nearest depot offering this option. Unfortunately, a self-sampling brush cannot be used for a Pap smear. For a Pap smear you will need to see a healthcare practitioner.

Self-collection for HPV testing is not recommended:

- Under the age of 25 years;
- If you are pregnant (rather visit your doctor);
- If you are experiencing any unusual vaginal bleeding, pain or discharge (consultation with your doctor is strongly recommended);
- If you have had a total hysterectomy because of pre-cancerous or cancerous changes in the cervix.

### References:

1. [https://hpcvcentre.net/statistics/reports/ZAF\\_FS.pdf](https://hpcvcentre.net/statistics/reports/ZAF_FS.pdf). (Accessed 04 January 2022)
2. <https://www.who.int/news/item/06-07-2021-new-recommendations-for-screening-and-treatment-to-prevent-cervical-cancer>. (Accessed 22 December 2021)
3. [CxCa policy SA NDoH 072021.pdf](#). (Accessed 03 January 2022)
4. [National-cervical-screening-program-quick-reference-guide-self-collected-cervical-screening-tests Australia.pdf](#). (Accessed 03 January 2022)