



Health (National Cervical Screening Programme) Amendment Act 2004

FACT SHEET 1

About the National Cervical Screening Programme

The National Cervical Screening Programme started in 1990. It aims to reduce the number of women who develop cancer of the cervix and the number who die from it. Cervical cancer can take up to 10 or more years to develop, and is one of the most preventable of all cancers.

Smear tests

- Cervical screening involves women having regular cervical smear tests every three years.
- In a smear test, cells are lightly brushed or scraped from the surface of the cervix, the neck of the uterus, and sent to a laboratory to be examined.
- Smear tests can detect abnormal cell changes when they can be treated very effectively, before they become cancer.

Who should be screened

Cervical screening is offered to all women aged from 20 until they turn 70 who have ever been sexually active. This includes:

- women with a male partner
- lesbians
- single women
- women with a disability
- women who have been through menopause (change of life)
- women who are not currently sexually active.

Frequency of smear tests

Cervical smear tests every three years gives very good protection against developing cervical cancer, while keeping to a minimum the number of smears a woman has in her lifetime.

Women who have regular cervical smear tests every three years as part of a screening programme reduce their risk of developing cervical cancer by about 90 percent. The National Cervical Screening Programme has achieved approximately a 40 percent reduction in the number of women who develop cervical cancer, and a 60 percent reduction in deaths from cervical cancer.

When smear tests should be more frequent

There are specific situations when the Programme advises women to have cervical smear tests more often than every three years:

- When a woman has her first cervical smear test, or her first for more than five years, she will be advised to have another smear test a year later. This is to reduce the chances of any abnormal cells being missed. If both results are normal, she will then be advised to have smear tests every three years.
- If a woman has had an unsatisfactory (difficult to read) or abnormal cervical smear result, she will be asked to come back sooner.
- Women who are treated for a high grade abnormality are advised to have a cervical smear test each year.
- Women who have a lowered immune system – because they are taking certain drugs or have certain illnesses or infections – will also be advised to have cervical smear tests each year.

How the National Cervical Screening Programme works

In the Programme, all screening activities are planned, co-ordinated, and evaluated so that:

- women are informed about the importance of having cervical smear tests
- women are offered cervical smear tests on a regular basis

- services are of a high quality and are culturally appropriate
- women with abnormal smears are followed up
- there is regular evaluation to see that the goals of the Programme are being met.

The National Screening Unit in the Ministry of Health manages the Programme by working collaboratively and contracting with some health organisations to carry out:

PROGRAMME ASPECT	HEALTH ORGANISATIONS
Health promotion	DHB public health services, Māori, Pacific and women's health services
Smear taking	More than 5,000 smear takers, including general practitioners, nurses, midwives and specialists
Cell and tissue analysis	10 regional laboratories
Regional co-ordination	13 regional NCSP services
Treatment for women with abnormal smear results	21 DHB colposcopy and other specialist colposcopy services
NCSP-Register	Wellington-based computer system – National Screening Unit of the Ministry of Health
Evaluation	National Screening Unit of the Ministry of Health