



Cervical screening start age changing from 20 to 25 years

New Zealand is aligning itself with international best practice and raising the age that women begin cervical screening from 20 to 25 years.

The Ministry's National Screening Unit (NSU) is co-ordinating the change which will come into effect from November.

NSU Clinical Director Dr Jane O'Hallahan says clinical evidence shows that screening women under the age of 25 has limited benefits, whilst immunisation against human papillomavirus (HPV) plays a key role in preventing cervical cancer.

"Cervical cancers in women under 25 years are rare and may not be prevented by screening. For the first 25 years of the National Cervical Screening Programme there was no reduction in the rate of cervical cancer in 20 to 24 year olds, despite significant reduction in cancer rates for older women."

Screening women aged 20 to 24 years can result in investigating and treating abnormalities that often resolve on their own, without intervention, thereby exposing young women to potentially unnecessary treatment.

Dr O'Hallahan says that women aged 20 to 24 are increasingly immunised against HPV, the virus that causes cervical cancer. "HPV immunisation offers greater protection from cervical cancer in women under 25 and it is funded for NZ residents up to 26 years of age. Women who have been immunised still need to have regular cervical screening tests from 25 because the vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV".

Cervical screening from age 25 or older is recommended by the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer. Other countries that have adopted the age change include, Australia, England, Scotland, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Ireland, Italy and Norway.

The programme change is being implemented across New Zealand from November 2019.

Important information about the change to the cervical screening start age:

- From November, women under 24.5 years of age who are not currently in the screening programme are *no longer invited for cervical screening*.
- Women under 25 who have already been screened, should *continue to be screened* according to the current pathway.
- Women can be invited to the screening programme from 24.5 years.
- It is important to note that any women, including those outside the screening age range, who have concerning symptoms such as unusual vaginal bleeding should see their health care provider who will arrange appropriate tests.

The NSU is working closely with Patients First and PMS vendors (Medtech, MyPractice, Intrahealth, Indici and Best Practice) to ensure the systems updates will occur in November. The key change to the PMS function(s) is supporting screening providers to invite women to start cervical screening at 25 years of age.

More about the programme change and PMS changes can be found on the NSU website project page at www.nsu.govt.nz.

Information to support consumers through this programme change can be found at www.timetoscreen.nz as well as in a printable pdf at the project page at www.nsu.govt.nz.