

# Cervical Cancer

What you should know



Marie Keating

FOUNDATION

making cancer less frightening by enlightening

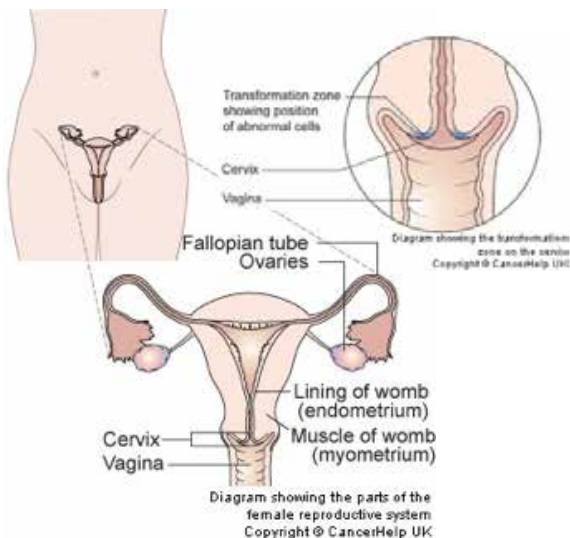
# cervical cancer the facts

- Around 325 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer in Ireland each year
- It is the most common cancer in women under 35
- Women aged 25 to 60 are invited to take part in free cervical screening through CervicalCheck
- Early treatment can prevent changes in the cervix developing into cancer

## The cervix and cervical cancer

The cervix is another name for the neck of the womb. The womb and cervix are part of a woman's reproductive system, which is made up of the vagina, the womb, including the cervix, and the ovaries.

The cervix is the opening to the womb from the vagina. It is a strong muscle. Normally it is quite tightly shut, with only a small opening to let sperm in and the flow from a period out of the womb. During labour, the cervix dilates to allow delivery of the baby.



## The cells of the cervix

The cervix is covered with a layer of skin-like cells on its outer surface. These cells can become cancerous, leading to cervical cancer.

The area where cervical cells are most likely to become cancerous is called the transformation zone. It is the area just around the opening of the cervix. This is the area that your doctor or nurse will concentrate on during cervical screening.

## Risks and causes of cervical cancer

- **Sexual History**

Women who had sex at a young age or have had several sexual partners have a higher risk of developing cervical cancer as they are more likely to develop Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) infection. But HPV is a common sexually transmitted infection (STI) which can affect anyone who has ever been sexually active. Condoms and diaphragms help protect against many STIs.

- **HPV infection**

HPV can cause genetic changes in the cells covering the cervix that make them more likely to become cancerous in time. As such, it is still important to carry on with cervical cancer screening even if your first smear comes back clear.

- **Smoking**

If you smoke, you are more likely to develop cervical cancer. There are cells in the lining of the cervix (Langerhans cells) that specifically help fight against disease but these cells do not work so well in smokers.

- **Family History**

Women who have a close relative with cervical cancer have a higher risk of developing the disease.

- **Being overweight**

Being overweight and not having enough fruit and vegetables in your diet can also increase your risk of cervical cancer.

## What to look out for

Cancers which are found early are the most easily treated. It makes sense to know how your body normally looks and feels.

The most common symptom of cervical cancer is bleeding from the vagina at times other than when you are having a period. You may experience:

- Bleeding between periods
- Bleeding after or during sex
- Bleeding at any time after the menopause
- A vaginal discharge that smells unpleasant
- Discomfort or pain during sex

**It is important to note that there are many conditions which can cause these symptoms, many of which are more common than cervical cancer. However, if you experience any of the above, you are advised to see your doctor to be sure.**

## CervicalCheck- the national cervical screening programme

CervicalCheck is a government funded service that provides free smear tests every three years to women aged 25-44 and every five years to women aged 45-60.

To avail of this free smear test, women can arrange an appointment with any of the 4,500 doctors or nurses registered with CervicalCheck nationwide. To identify a GP practice or clinic, visit [www.cervicalcheck.ie](http://www.cervicalcheck.ie) or Freephone 1800 45 45 55. Women who have already participated in CervicalCheck will be automatically reminded by letter when their next smear test is due. The CervicalCheck website can also tell you when your next smear test is due. You will need your PPS number to hand to use this service.

## How cervical cancer is diagnosed

Cervical screening is a way of preventing cancer by finding and treating early changes in the cervix which could lead to cancer if left untreated.

The screening is often called a smear test. A nurse or doctor takes a sample of cells from the cervix with a small brush to check for abnormalities. In some cases, samples are also tested for HPV as this can increase the risk of cervical cancer.

### What the results mean

CervicalCheck will write to you with the result, usually within two weeks. Most women have a normal result. In this case you will be invited for screening again in 3 to 5 years depending on your age.

You may need a repeat test because the sample was inadequate or could not be read properly. This may be because it was hard to see the cells of the cervix due to:

- Not enough cells in the sample
- You had an infection
- You had your period
- The cervix was inflamed

If asked to go back for another test, it is very important to follow through with this instruction. This should usually happen within three months.

### If you have an abnormal result

5% of women have an abnormal cervical screening results. It means there are changes to the cells on the cervix. These changes are not cancer. The cells often go back to normal by themselves. But in some women, if not treated, these changes could develop into cancer in the future. If cancer does develop, your doctor will talk to you about treatment options.

### Human Papilloma virus School Immunisation Programme

The free HPV vaccine will help to protect girls from developing cervical cancer. It is available from the HSE for girls in 1st year of secondary school. It protects against around 70% of all cervical cancers. As such, it is still important for girls who have been vaccinated to have regular smear tests when they are adults.

## About the Marie Keating Foundation

Following their mother Marie's death in 1998, the Keating family promised that they would do everything they could to bring an end to breast cancer. They committed to provide all women and their families with the necessary information to prevent cancer or detect it at its earliest stages. Their collective aim was **"making cancer less frightening by enlightening"**.

Through its community information service, the Foundation's dedicated nurses have enlightened over 180,000 people of the causes and risk factors of breast and other cancers. The Foundation is continuing to expand its awareness campaigns on each of the key cancers, at local level through its community outreach approach as well as through national campaigns.

The Foundation finances other areas of need in cancer care. Monies raised help to refurbish hospital oncology waiting rooms in making them more comfortable for patients. A limited comfort fund for those in financial difficulty as a result of their illness provides immediate assistance, when required.

*On February 2nd 1998, our mother Marie died from breast cancer. At the time and all through her illness, we could do nothing to help our Mother who had, all our lives, done everything for us. We, the Keating family have set up this charity in her name to try to help and prevent others going through what Mam went through and what we are still going through to this day. This is also to show that such a wonderful mother and person did not die in vain.*

**Take care,**



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