

Cervical cancer screening

The aim of the cervical cancer screening programme is to reduce the number of women who develop cervical cancer and the number of women who die from it.



It tries to do this by testing as many women as possible, examining the test results and referring the women for further treatment if any early warning signs are present.

Although a cervical screening programme has been in place in Northern Ireland for over 20 years, we are constantly working to improve the quality of the programme and ensure it is as effective as possible. During this time, women aged 20-64 have been invited for screening every five years. However, as further research has been carried out, it has become increasingly evident that screening women under the age of 25 is likely to do more harm than good.

The screening test (often known as a smear test) looks for abnormal changes in the cells which line the cervix. These abnormal changes may go on to develop into cancer if left untreated. However, in some cases, particularly young women, the body's immune system will return the cells to normal by themselves, rendering them harmless.

Cervical cancer is very rare in women under 25, with only one or two cases occurring each year in Northern Ireland. Young women who are screened are more likely to have an abnormal screening test result and undergo further tests and treatments that they do not need. Unnecessary treatment can cause significant anxiety and, in some cases, lead to a higher risk of premature birth in future pregnancies.

In light of this evidence, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety announced in July 2010 that the age range and interval for the cervical screening programme would change from January 2011. The new policy means that women aged 25-49 will be invited for screening every three years, and those aged 50-64 every five years.

REFERENCE : HSC NI Public Health Agency