

Answering common concerns following the new HPV screening test and what a positive result means.

Background:

In September 2023, a Human Papillomavirus (HPV) screening test became the new method for cervical screening in Aotearoa New Zealand. This test is for the high-risk Human Papillomavirus (HrHPV) types which may lead to cell changes that could cause cervical cancer. Most positive HrHPV tests never develop into cancer.

In most cases, this new HPV test replaces the need for a speculum examination (known as a pap smear) as part of cervical screening.

What does your positive test really mean?

- Having a positive HrHPV test does not mean you will have or will get cancer. After a positive test you can be monitored by colposcopy through the cervical screening programme. This ensures that if abnormal cells are detected they can be treated, if necessary, well before they may ever develop into cancer.

What does this mean for your sex life past, present and future?

- Unless you have been vaccinated before becoming sexually active, you are likely to have been exposed to the genital HPVs. Sometimes called the common cold of STIs, HPV is a virus that most of us will have during our lifetime.
- The vaccine protects against nine different subtypes of the virus, so even with vaccination there is still a risk of exposure to HPV. However, most HPV types are asymptomatic and/or have no/low risk of causing cervical cell changes. The vaccine protects you against the most common low-risk and high-risk types.
- You may have HPV for years without it causing any problems. How and when you got HPV doesn't matter as it is rarely possible to know.
- A positive HrHPV test does not mean you need to change who you sleep with or what you do with them sexually.

What should male partners do if you have a positive high-risk HPV test?

- There are no diagnostic or screening tests for HrHPV for males. There is no need to do anything.