

# NSW Cervical Screening Program Campaign

## Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable cancers. In 2005 the NSW incidence rate was 5.8 new cases of cervical cancer per 100,000 and the mortality rate was 2.0 deaths per 100,000. Approximately 1 woman in 179 would be expected to develop cervical cancer by the age of 85 years.<sup>1</sup>

The NSW Cervical Screening Program was established in 1994. Between 1996 and 2005 the age standardised incidence rates of cervical cancer fell by 42% and mortality rates fell by 47% over the same period.<sup>2</sup> This rapid fall in cervical cancer incidence and mortality is largely attributed to early detection by population screening programs and the treatment of precancerous abnormalities. A recent study showed that 65% of women in NSW who were diagnosed with cervical cancer have not had regular two-yearly screening.



The major risk factor for cervical cancer is persistent infection with Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) and an increasing risk with age.

Pap tests pick up early warning signs that can be treated before cancer develops. Cervical screening, by having regular Pap tests, is estimated to be over 90% effective in preventing cases of cervical cancer in women.

The NSW Cervical Screening Program recommends Pap tests every two years for women aged between 18-69 years who have ever had sexual intercourse.

The NSW Cervical Screening Program is a jointly funded Commonwealth/State and Territory initiative managed by the Cancer Institute NSW.

For more information on the NSW Cervical Screening Program visit [www.csp.nsw.gov.au](http://www.csp.nsw.gov.au).

<sup>1</sup> Tracey E, Baker D, Chen W, Bishop J, *Cancer in New South Wales Incidence, Mortality and Prevalence 2005*. Sydney: Cancer Institute NSW, November 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Tracey E et al.

## **NSW Cervical Screening Program Campaign – ‘Don’t Just Sit There’**

‘Don’t Just Sit There’ aims to increase awareness of the need for women to have regular cervical screening. The campaign encourages women 18-69 years to make an appointment for a Pap test with their doctor every two years.

The campaign demonstrates the difference between the feeling of being uncomfortable during a Pap test and the feeling of being uncomfortable during the treatments of cervical cancer which could involve chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery. It also reinforces the need for regular Pap tests for women who may have been recently vaccinated against cervical cancer. The campaign targets women between 18-69 years in NSW who are unscreened or under-screened. Women are encouraged to contact their doctor and make an appointment for a Pap test.

The NSW Pap Test Register indicates a steady decline in the screening numbers of women aged 20-69 years in NSW, with 77.3% of women screened in 1998 declining to 72.8% in 2004. During this time the NSW Cervical Screening Program had not run a mass media campaign for cervical screening.

The ‘Don’t Just Sit There’ campaign, originally developed by the Cancer Council Victoria in 2004, has helped increase screening rates in several states across Australia. In 2007 there were 21% more Pap tests conducted in NSW during the campaign period in comparison to the same period in 2006. Due to this positive impact on women’s screening behaviour the campaign will run again in 2008.

Further information about Pap tests is available by visiting [www.csp.nsw.gov.au](http://www.csp.nsw.gov.au).

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **1. *What is a Pap test?***

A Pap test is a quick and simple test in which a number of cells are collected from the cervix and sent to a laboratory where they are tested for changes. No drugs or anaesthetics are required and a doctor or women's health nurse can easily do it. Having a Pap test can feel uncomfortable, but it should not hurt. It only takes a few minutes and is the best protection against cervical cancer.

### **2. *How does a Pap test protect women against cervical cancer?***

Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable of all cancers. A Pap test can detect changes in cervical cells, such as abnormal cells, that have the potential to develop into cervical cancer. These abnormalities can be treated before cancer develops.

Noncancerous conditions, such as infection and inflammation may also be found.

### **3. *Does an abnormal result always mean a women has cervical cancer?***

No! Over 90% of Pap tests are normal. Only a small number of tests show changes in the cells of the cervix. Most of these changes are due to HPV infections which usually clear up naturally without any need for treatment. In a small number of women, these changes may develop into a high grade abnormality and in an even smaller number, may progress to cervical cancer. When detected early by a Pap test, these changes can be treated and cured.

That is why having a Pap test every two years is so important.

### **4. *How effective are Pap tests?***

A Pap test every two years can prevent the most common form of cervical cancer in up to 90% of cases and is the best protection against cervical cancer.

### **5. *What are the symptoms of cervical cancer?***

In the early stages of cervical cancer, there are usually no symptoms at all. The only way you will know is if you have a Pap test.

### **6. *What causes cervical cancer?***

Long term infection with the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is known to be the cause of almost all cervical cancers. A Pap test every two years can detect any abnormal cell changes caused by HPV, which can then be monitored and/or treated to prevent cancer.

### **7. *Who is at risk of cervical cancer?***

All women with a cervix who have ever had sex are at risk of cervical cancer.

About half of the new cases of cervical cancer diagnosed each year are in women over 50 years of age. Women over the age of 50 years are less likely to have regular Pap tests. More of these women die from cervical cancer because their cancer is

diagnosed at a later stage, when treatment is less effective. Having a Pap test every two years will help prevent most of these cancers in older women.

### **8. Who should have a Pap test?**

All women over 18 who have ever had sex should have regular Pap tests, even if the women are no longer having sex. This includes male to female, and female to female sex.

There is no need to have Pap tests earlier than the age of 18 years, even if the women has started having sex earlier. At age 70 your doctor may advise that it's safe to stop having Pap tests if the woman has had two normal Pap tests within the last five years.

### **9. How often should women have a Pap test?**

Women should have a Pap test every two years. It may be necessary to have a Pap test more frequently if there have been abnormal cells which are being monitored and/or treated.

### **10. Do women over 70 years of age need to have a Pap test?**

Women 70 years or over who have never had a Pap test do need to have one.

However women 70 years or over who have had two normal Pap tests within the last five years, do not need to continue having Pap tests, but may do so if they wish.

### **11. Do women who have been through menopause need to have a Pap test?**

Yes. The risk of getting cervical cancer increases with age. If a woman has ever had sex, even with only one partner, it is important to keep having Pap tests. A Pap test every two years until women are 70 years old, even after menopause, is their best protection against cervical cancer.

### **12. Where can women go to have a Pap test?**

A women should choose a person and place that is most convenient to her and where she feels comfortable such as:

- doctor or general practitioner
- community or women's health centre
- family planning clinics or FPA health clinic
- women's health nurse
- sexual health clinic
- Aboriginal Medical Service

Most women tend to visit their general practitioner (GP) for their Pap test as part of a routine health check.

### **13. What does a Pap test cost?**

Two costs are involved – the doctor's consultation fee (collection of the specimen) and the fee for the pathology laboratory (analysis of the specimen).

Cost vary according to providers. Some doctors, clinics, health centres and laboratories 'bulk bill' and if so, there are no out of pocket expenses. Where a fee is

charged, women are able to claim a rebate from Medicare. The cost to the woman will be the difference between the rebate and the medical fees.

#### **14. Is there any system to remind women their Pap test is due?**

Some doctors and health clinics have reminder systems in place.

The NSW Pap Test Register is a confidential record of all Pap tests of women in NSW and plays a key role in assisting women to keep up to date with their Pap tests. It does this by:

- Sending women a reminder letter if they are overdue for their next test.
- Working with the woman's doctor or nurse to make sure they have follow-up care if needed.
- Keeping a confidential record of women's Pap test results.

Women can choose to opt off the register in which case a reminder letter will not be sent to her. More information on the NSW Pap Test Register can be found at [www.cancerinstitute.org.au/cancer\\_inst/programs/ptr.html](http://www.cancerinstitute.org.au/cancer_inst/programs/ptr.html)

#### **15. What is the HPV vaccine?**

There is a new vaccine that can protect women against the cause of most cervical cancers.

The vaccine protects women against certain strains of the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), which are known to cause 7 out of 10 cases of cervical cancer and 9 out of 10 cases of genital warts.

The Australian Government provides the new vaccine free to all women and girls aged between 12 and 26 through the National HPV Vaccination Program.

More details about the program are available from the Immunise Australia National Hotline on 1800 671 811 or the program website [www.health.gov.au/internet/standby/publishing.nsf/Content/home](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/standby/publishing.nsf/Content/home)

#### **16. Do women who have had the HPV vaccine still need to have Pap tests?**

Yes. Pap tests continue to be essential to detect cervical cancers and precancerous changes, even in women who have been vaccinated against strains of HPV. The vaccine protects women against cancer and cervical warts caused by four strains of HPV which cause about 70% of cervical cancers. It does not, however, provide protection against all types of cancer caused by HPV.

#### **Links**

National Cervical Screening Program  
[www.cancerscreening.gov.au/internet/screening/publishing.nsf/Content/cervical-1lp](http://www.cancerscreening.gov.au/internet/screening/publishing.nsf/Content/cervical-1lp)

National HPV Vaccination Program  
[www.health.gov.au/internet/standby/publishing.nsf/Content/home](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/standby/publishing.nsf/Content/home)

NSW Cervical Screening Program [www.csp.nsw.gov.au](http://www.csp.nsw.gov.au)

NSW Pap Test Register [www.cancerinstitute.org.au/cancer\\_inst/programs/ptr.html](http://www.cancerinstitute.org.au/cancer_inst/programs/ptr.html)