

HPV testing could cut cervical cancers by a third

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(Medical Xpress)—Testing women for the human papillomavirus (HPV) first, instead of using the traditional cervical screening test to detect abnormal cells in the cervix, could prevent around 600 cases of cervical cancer a year in England.

These results - from Cancer Research UK - are being presented at Public Health England's National Cancer Intelligence Network annual conference in Brighton and published in the *Journal of Medical Screening*.

Cancer Research UK scientists, based at Queen Mary, University of London, identified more than 8,750 women with cervical cancer and looked back at their [screening](#) records. They found almost 40 per cent had a negative [cytology](#) test result – the existing [cervical screening](#) test – within six years of their diagnosis.

They then used these data to predict how many more cases of cervical cancer could have been prevented if HPV testing had been used as primary screening test instead of the cytology test.

Assuming that primary HPV1 testing would pick up

95 per cent² of the cases missed by cytology, the researchers estimate that it could prevent up to 33 per cent of cervical cancer cases in women aged 25-64 if introduced in England.

The cervical screening programme prevents cases of cervical cancer by detecting and treating [abnormal changes](#) in the cells of the cervix, which can be the precursors of cancer.

At the moment [cervical cells](#) are studied under a microscope to detect abnormalities – this is known as cytology. HPV testing is only used when women's cells display mild or borderline abnormalities.

Primary HPV testing is done in the same way but is better at identifying women at risk of cervical cancer.

In England around 1800 cases of cervical cancer are diagnosed each year in women aged 25-64. This research suggests say that HPV testing could cut that number by around a third predicting that around an additional 600 women might have their cancer prevented.³

Professor Peter Sasieni, study author and Cancer Research UK funded scientist at Queen Mary, University of London, said: "Cervical cancer screening is already hugely effective but our study shows how much better it could be by swapping to primary HPV testing. Not only would introducing primary HPV testing prevent more cases of cancer, it would also mean women who tested negative wouldn't need to be checked as often."

Hazel Nunn, health information manager at Cancer Research UK, said: "Although we already have a very effective cervical cancer screening programme, this study suggests that we could do even better if primary HPV testing was introduced here in the UK."

"The National Screening Programme is already piloting the primary HPV test in some parts of England and this should give us a clearer indication of what such a major change to the screening programme would entail. Cervical cancer screening is very effective at catching abnormal cells before they develop into [cervical cancer](#)."

More information: Castanon, A., Landy, R. and Sasieni, P. (2013). How much could primary human papillomavirus testing reduce cervical cancer incidence and morbidity? *Journal of Medical Screening*. DOI: [10.1177/0969141313492313](https://doi.org/10.1177/0969141313492313)

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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