

# Colposcopy for minor abnormalities on the cervical smear test

## What is Colposcopy?

Colposcopy is a detailed examination of the cervix (neck of the womb). A colposcope is a special magnifying instrument, which allows the doctor or specialist nurse to get a clear view of the cells of the cervix. Sometimes the vagina and the vulva (the folds of skin outside the vagina) are examined at the same time.

A colposcopy is carried out by a doctor or specially trained nurse as an outpatient procedure. The colposcopy should not cause any pain or discomfort.

## Why do I need a Colposcopy?

A Colposcopy is usually done because you have recently had an abnormal cervical smear result. This is not unusual – approximately 1 in 10 cervical smear test results are abnormal. Generally an abnormal smear test indicates changes in cells on the cervix. Although abnormal cells rarely turn out to be too serious, it is still important to carry out a further investigation to make sure that cervical cancer can be either ruled out, or treated, as soon as possible.

A colposcopy allows the doctor or specialist nurse to have a more detailed look at the abnormal cells on the cervix.

## What happens at the colposcopy clinic?

You are welcome to bring someone with you who can be present when you see the colposcopist if you wish. You may find that a loose fitting skirt or long top and trousers are most convenient. Please bring a sanitary pad with you as you may have some vaginal discharge or spotting blood after the colposcopy.

### **Visiting clinical staff**

This is a teaching hospital and there may be a visiting doctor, nurse or a medical student in the clinic. We will ask for your permission for them to stay while you are being examined, and will respect your decision if you do not wish them to be present.

### **Before the colposcopy**

The colposcopist will ask you some background questions, explain the reason for the examination, and tell you what the examination will involve. A female nurse will be present at all times to help you as much as you need.

### **During the colposcopy**

The first part of the examination is very much like having a smear test and should not be uncomfortable. However, if you have found smear taking painful or difficult in the past, please let the colposcopist know.

You will be asked to lie on your back on a special couch that has supports for your legs. As with a smear test, an instrument (speculum) is gently inserted into the vagina and the colposcopist looks through the colposcope that magnifies the view of your cervix. The colposcopist can see pictures of your cervix on a screen and so you can also watch what's happening if you wish.

## Investigations

During the examination the colposcopist will apply various solutions to the cervix that will highlight any abnormal cells. This is not painful.

Your smear suggests that you have only minor changes in the cells of your cervix – which we investigate by looking at the abnormal area. Sometimes we need to take some small biopsies (samples of tissue) that will be examined in the laboratory. This is to decide on the best follow-up for you – which may be a further smear test, a further colposcopy, or less likely, some treatment. Taking biopsies may cause some brief discomfort.

The examination may last approximately 15 minutes.

The colposcopist will talk to you about the findings of the examination and what happens next.

## Follow-up

Before you leave the clinic the staff will answer any questions you may have. We will write to both you and your GP with any test results and follow-up arrangements within two to three weeks. If you do not receive this letter, or if you need your results earlier, please telephone the clinic.

## Some practical questions

### **What should I do if I have a period on the day of my colposcopy?**

Usually this is no problem, unless it is exceptionally heavy. If you feel particularly awkward about being examined with a period, please contact us.

### **What happens if I no longer have periods?**

If you are past the menopause and are not on HRT, we will ask you to use some vaginal oestrogen cream for two weeks before your appointment. This will make the examination more comfortable for you and more accurate.

### **May I have intercourse in the week before my colposcopy?**

Yes.

### **Does a coil interfere with colposcopy treatment?**

A coil does not interfere with colposcopy. However, for certain procedures it may be necessary to remove the coil. It is, therefore, important to avoid intercourse for 7 days before your appointment or use additional barrier methods. Please tell us as soon as possible if you have a coil.

### **What happens if I'm pregnant?**

You will still need a colposcopy appointment, but this will be planned according to your results and the expected date of delivery, or your last period.

Colposcopy and taking cervical smears can be undertaken quite safely during pregnancy, but any other investigations or treatments are usually postponed until after your baby is born. If you are pregnant, please telephone us and we can plan your appointment accordingly.

## Will colposcopy affect my fertility?

Routine colposcopy and treatment has not been shown to affect your ability to get pregnant or give birth.

## About wart virus – HPV (Human Papilloma Virus)

There are many different strains of wart virus. Those sometimes detected on a smear are different from those that cause common warts on the skin or verrucae. It is possible for actual warts to occur on the cervix, vagina or vulva in women or on the penis in men.

A high proportion of the population have been exposed to wart virus at some time. Some people will be aware of having had genital warts, but most will not.

In some women, the wart virus produces changes on a smear which are similar to abnormal cells (dyskaryosis). This needs to be checked more frequently with smear tests and/or colposcopy treatment.

## How to contact us / Further information

There is continuous change and development within the cervical screening programme. More information can be obtained via websites or clinic staff.

Staff at the clinic are always happy to answer any questions you may have about your smear or colposcopy examination.

### **Please telephone:**

**Tel: (01865) 572110**

### **Colposcopy Department**

**The Churchill Hospital**

**Old Road**

**Headington**

**Oxford OX3 7LJ**

You may also find helpful information on the following website:

**[www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk](http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk)**

**We would welcome your suggestions and constructive comments on the information and service we provide.**

### **Enclosure 2**

“If your first language is not English and you require an interpreter for your appointment, Language Line is a telephone line which provides instant access to interpreters. We can also book an interpreter to be present at your appointment. Please would you contact the colposcopy department if you wish to use this service”.