



HPV PCR TESTING

CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING

Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer amongst South African women. Regular screening identifies women who may be at risk of cervical cancer so that they can receive further testing, follow up and treatment if needed.

THE ROLE OF HPV

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection, with almost all sexually active people being infected at some point in their lives. Most infections have no symptoms, and the immune system clears the HPV infection from the body. However, if the HPV infection is persistent (ongoing) in the cervix (lower part of the womb) with high-risk HPV types, this can cause abnormal cells to develop, which over time become cancer if not treated.

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REGULAR SCREENING TESTS FOR EARLY DETECTION AND TREATMENT

Women can screen for cervical cancer by doing either an HPV PCR test (looks for genetic material of the virus) and/ or Pap smear test (examines the cells of the cervix). The HPV PCR test is the recommended test for screening, as it is very sensitive in picking up HPV infection. Hence, when testing negative, the time before re-testing is much longer compared to a conventional pap smear. A vaginal swab is all that is needed to do the HPV test, which makes it a more convenient, less invasive option for women compared to having a traditional pap smear test.

WHO SHOULD CONSIDER DOING A HPV PCR TEST?

- All women from 25 years of age
- Both HPV vaccinated and unvaccinated women.

WHAT DOES MY RESULT MEAN?

If you test HPV positive, it does not mean that you have cervical cancer. It means you have an HPV infection and need further evaluation by a medical practitioner. The HPV type, your age and HIV status all play a role in deciding whether you need further testing or immediate treatment.

If you test HPV negative, you need to rescreen 5 years from the time of testing. If you are HIV positive more frequent screening is recommended, ideally every three years following a negative HPV PCR.

When to stop screening for cervical cancer should be discussed with your medical practitioner, who will look at your risk factors, as well as laboratory results prior to making a recommendation of when it would be safe to do so.

SCREENING DIAGRAM

