

COLPOSCOPY

Colposcopy is carried out to examine your cervix (neck of the womb). It is usually recommended if a cervical smear test has reported a problem with the cells on the surface of your cervix.

What are abnormal cells on a smear?

Abnormal cells are **NOT** cancer cells. When you have a smear, a brush is wiped across the surface of the cervix and this removes some of the surface cells, which are then looked at under a microscope by doctors in the laboratory. They can sometimes see changes within the cells which suggest that in some cases, left untreated, the cells could develop into cancer in the future.

Are there any alternatives to colposcopy?

A cervical smear is what we call a 'screening test'. All a screening test does is tell us that there might be a problem, it does not tell us what the problem is. Colposcopy is what we call a 'diagnostic test' and colposcopy is the only way of finding out what the problem is and what treatment is required, if any.

What will happen when I have a colposcopy?

In the colposcopy clinic, the consultant will visualise the cervix using a speculum, which is the instrument inserted into the vagina when you have a smear. The consultant then uses a colposcope which magnifies the view of the cervix. This instrument is not put inside the vagina – the consultant simply looks through it. The consultant will then put some fluid on the cervix which makes it easier for any abnormal cells to be seen. The consultant may decide:

1. That there is no visible abnormality present and a plan will be made to repeat a smear at a later date.
2. That there is an abnormality visible which may or may not need treatment and the consultant may take a small piece of tissue as a biopsy to help decide on whether treatment is required.
3. Your consultant may decide it is best to treat the problem straightaway. This is usually done by removing the abnormal area that is visible on the surface of the cervix by a procedure called a LETZ (large loop excision of the transformation zone). This procedure is usually performed under local anaesthetic in the colposcopy clinic.

What will happen after the colposcopy?

If the procedure is performed under local anaesthetic, you will be able to go home straight after the procedure and you should be back to normal activities the day after the procedure. Your consultant will contact you with the results of any biopsies taken and will usually arrange a follow up colposcopy and smear to be taken at a later date.

Dr Kyle Gilmour, July 2009