Screening for cervical cancer

2015
Why do we carry out cervical cancer screening?
Every year, about 700 women in the Netherlands get cervical cancer. Most of these women are between 30 and 60 years old. We are therefore inviting all women in this age group to take part in the screening programme. They will be invited to undergo a free examination once every five years. This screening programme allows us to detect precancerous tissue changes in the cervix before the cancer has fully developed. Detecting and treating these precancerous conditions often makes it possible to prevent cervical cancer. In some cases, the screening will show up cancerous changes in the cervix. This means we can treat the cervical cancer early. Early treatment means that there is a greater chance of successful treatment, and it often makes the treatment less stressful for the woman concerned.

Every year, 500,000 women take part in this screening programme in the Netherlands.

What causes cervical cancer?
Cervical cancer is caused by infection with the human papilloma virus (HPV), which is sexually transmitted. HPV is highly infectious, so everyone who has sex can be infected. The infection is often mild, because the body’s own defences deal with it effectively. In some cases, however, the virus can remain in the body for a long time and lead to precancerous tissue changes. These precancerous tissue changes may sometimes develop into cervical cancer. This is a very slow process, which explains why screening for the disease once in 5 years is an adequate preventive method.

The screening mainly detects precancerous tissue changes in the cervix. Treatment at this stage will prevent the development of cervical cancer. This is the major benefit of screening. Untreated precancerous changes will sometimes clear up spontaneously. That means that treatment would have been unnecessary in these cases. This is one of the disadvantages of screening.
The information provided in this leaflet can help you to make up your mind whether to participate in the screening programme. It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part or not. You can visit the national cervical cancer screening website  
www.bevolkingsonderzoekbaarmoederhalskanker.nl
for more information about HPV, the chances of getting cervical cancer, the procedure used in screening. You can also find out about any changes to the procedure and the pros and cons of screening.

What does the screening involve?  
The screening takes place at your local GP practice, and is usually performed by the doctor’s assistant. She will start by asking you a few questions, for example about when you had your last period. Then you undress from the waist down. You lie on the examination table and bend your knees, or you put your legs in special support stirrups. The assistant carefully slides a special instrument called a speculum into the vagina. She gathers cells from the cervix with a small brush, and transfers them into a small container. Then she removes the speculum from the vagina. The smear is then examined in the laboratory to see whether any abnormal cells are present.

The entire examination takes about 10 minutes and is usually painless. An animated video clip of the procedure is shown on the website.

Making an appointment for cervical screening  
You have to phone your GP yourself to make an appointment, although sometimes the date and time of the examination are given in the letter of invitation. The cervical smear cannot be taken while you are having your period. If that is the case, you should change your appointment.

The cervical smear is taken by a female doctor’s assistant in most GP practices. If that is not possible at your local GP practice, you can ask to have the examination performed by a female doctor or nurse. For further information, please phone your regional
screening organisation. The phone number can be found in your letter of invitation or at the website.

**Tips about the examination**
- Go to the toilet before the examination.
- Try to relax during the examination.
- If you feel nervous or embarrassed about the cervical examination you should tell the practice nurse beforehand and she will try to put you at your ease.

**How will you get the results?**
You will receive the results in a letter from your regional screening organisation. If further tests are required, your GP will usually get in touch with you.

**What are the possible results?**

*No abnormality*
We have found no abnormalities in the smear. This is the case for about 94 per cent of all women who undergo screening for cervical cancer. This result is not completely reliable however. You should always consult your GP if you get an abnormal vaginal discharge or unexpected vaginal bleeding. You will be invited to take part in the screening programme again in 5 years.

*Inconclusive result*
The quality of the smear taken was not good enough to be examined. About 2 women out of every hundred get this result. They will be invited to have another smear taken in 6 weeks.

*Slight abnormality*
A slight abnormality is found in 3 women out of every hundred. Your GP will then invite you to have another smear taken in 6 months. In 65 cases out of a hundred, the second smear will be normal: the abnormality will have disappeared spontaneously.

*Serious abnormality*
A serious abnormality is found. This is the case for less than 1 per cent of all women who undergo screening for cervical cancer. If you get this result, your GP will refer you to a gynaecologist for
further investigation. The chance that you will actually have cervical cancer is quite small. Only about 1 out of every 30 women with this result will turn out to have cervical cancer. The others have a precancerous condition, and generally receive treatment to prevent the development of cervical cancer.

Costs
Taking the cervical smear at your local GP practice is free. An examination carried out by a gynaecologist is not part of the screening programme, so it is not free. This also applies to further tests after moderate and severe abnormalities have been found. The cost of these tests is covered by your health insurance. You may have to pay part or all of the costs. This depends on the size of your health insurance excess, and on how much of this you have used. If you have any questions about this, you should discuss them with your health insurance company.

Personal data for screening
We need your personal details so that we can invite you for a screening. The local council has provided us with your name, date of birth and address for this purpose.

What do we do with the results from the screening programme?
We comply with the Data Protection Act (Wet Bescherming Persoonsgegevens). The results of the screening are used to improve cervical cancer research. This involves sharing the results with other organisations, such as hospitals. Your privacy is fully protected throughout. Further information about this is given at the website.

If you do not wish us to share your personal details or screening results with others, you can opt out of this procedure. Details about how to do this are given at the website www.bevolkingsonderzoekbaarmoederhalskanker.nl.
Further information

If you have any questions about your health, you should consult your GP.

The regional screening organisations carry out the cervical cancer screening programme on behalf of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM). If you have any queries, suggestions or complaints about the screening programme, you should contact your regional screening organisation. The screening organisations have set up a procedure for dealing with complaints. You can find the contact details of the screening organisation, including its telephone number and address, at the website www.bevolkingsonderzoekbaarmoederhalskanker.nl. This website also includes detailed information about the screening programme.

Screening programmes are recognizable by the logo: 
bevolkingsonderzoek

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