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Cancer, screening and Women's Health

### Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer is one of the most common cancers of the reproductive system. As a disease that mainly affects young women with families, it causes a great deal of suffering amongst patients, and is one that we should all be aware of. Most cases are caused by infection with Human Papilloma Virus (HPV).

Fortunately, due to an effective national screening programme (smear tests), cervical cancer is relatively uncommon in the UK. Prevention of HPV infection with a vaccine has been shown to be highly effective in preventing the pre-cancerous changes associated with persistent infection\*. A national programme aimed at vaccinating young women began in 2008 and it is expected that this will have an enormous impact on reducing death from cervical cancer. Due to its success, it raises other questions, such as whether to vaccinate older women, men or even those with persistent infection.

HPV infection is extremely common and is acquired through intimate contact. The majority of infections produce no obvious symptoms and the body's immune system clears the infection. For a small minority of people the infection persists and it is this group who are at most risk of developing cervical pre-cancer and cervical cancer. The chances of successfully treating cancer are highest when detected early.

In some situations, for those concerned about cervical cancer, HPV testing may prove beneficial. The first is in the group of women with low grade abnormalities on their smear tests. Women with these changes, who test negative for high risk HPV types, are at much lower risk of developing cervical cancer and can be returned to the regular follow-up programme sooner. The second are those women who have been treated for high grade abnormalities. HPV testing has been used here as a test of cure and women with a negative HPV test after treatment can also be returned to regular re-call sooner.

However, whilst we wait for further evidence of the success of this relatively new programme, patients should always attend their GP practice when invited for a smear test by the national screening programme.

\* [Mr Brinkmann offers Gardasil vaccine in his clinics. Please contact us for more information.](#)  
Ovarian Cancer

Ovarian cancer is the fourth most common women's cancer and the UK has one of the highest incidents of ovarian cancer in Europe.

The symptoms of ovarian cancer are often common and vague, and may be attributed to less serious ailments such as indigestion, weight gain or the consequences of aging. This makes ovarian cancer difficult to diagnose and can result in patients presenting late, with advanced stages of the disease and consequently a poorer chance of survival.

For the women diagnosed before ovarian cancer has spread, the treatment may be more successful and the outlook can be good.

The UK Collaborative Trial of Ovarian Cancer Screening (UKCTOCS) has been established to determine whether screening can reduce the risk of dying from ovarian cancer. The trial uses two methods; one method is a transvaginal ultrasound scan to see the ovaries via ultrasound. The second method involves a blood test to measure for a protein called CA-125, which is released at higher levels into the blood in women with ovarian cancer.

Initial preliminary results suggest that screening may have the potential to reduce death from ovarian cancer. However, the full results of the trial will not be known until 2014 and therefore women should contact their GP if they are concerned about any symptoms that might suggest ovarian cancer.