

The National Cervical Screening Program

*Understanding the guidelines
for HPV testing*



A Healthier Future for Australian Patients

The National Cervical Screening Program

The way Australian patients are screened for cervical cancer has changed. The Medical Services Advisory Committee recommend a liquid-based collection for HPV DNA testing with a five-yearly screening interval. Screening now commences at 25 years of age.

Cervical Screening with a Molecular HPV Test

A sample of cells is collected from the cervix into the liquid-based specimen vial, which is analysed to identify the presence of HPV viral DNA at the molecular level. The traditional glass slide Pap smear has been phased out and now incurs a private fee as the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) no longer covers the cost and is not recognised by the new guidelines.

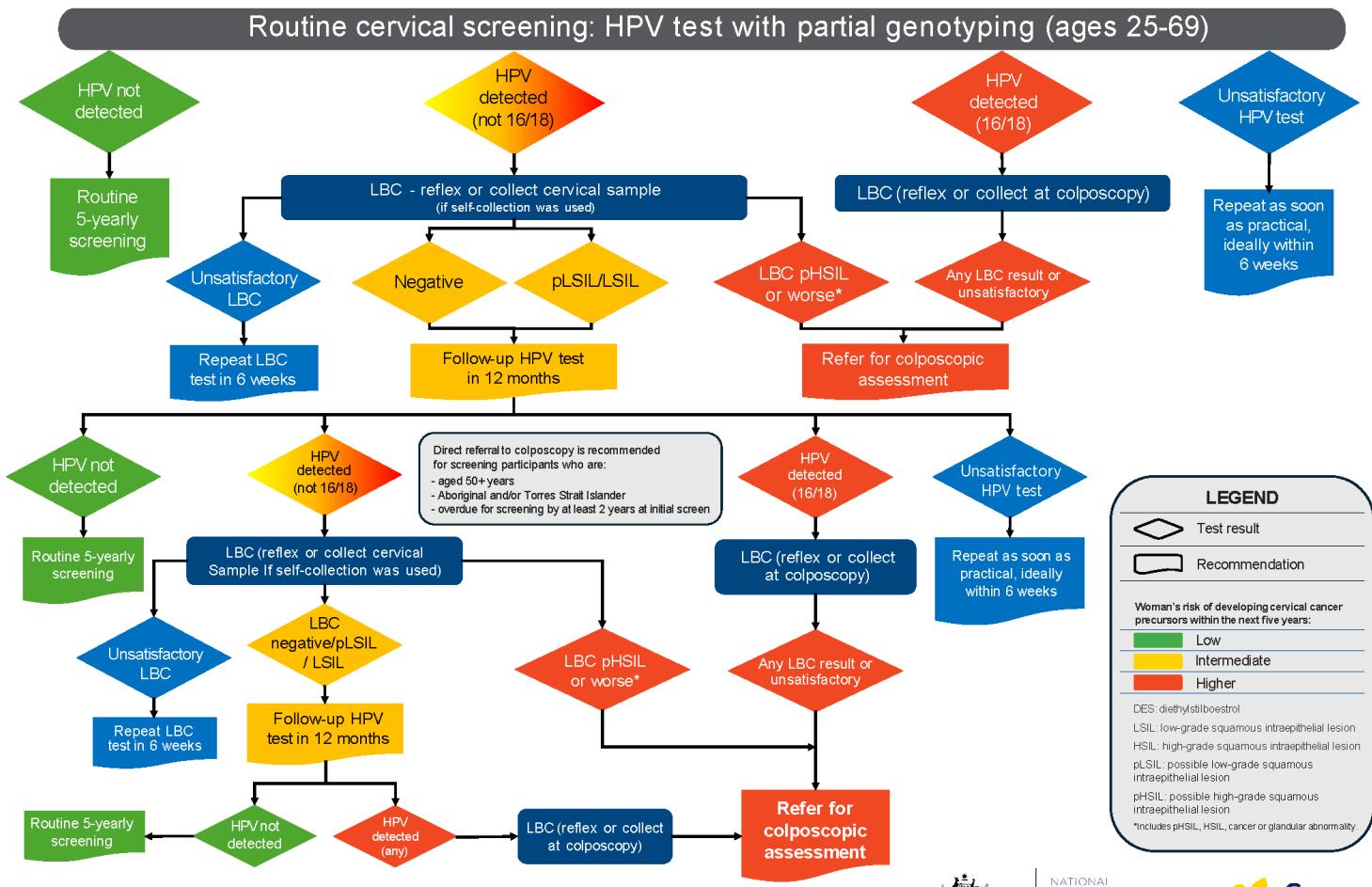
What do I need to know?

Patients aged 25 to 74 years are invited every 5 years to have an HPV test. This includes both vaccinated and unvaccinated screening participants.

- If HPV is **not detected**, Cytology will not be performed and a recommendation to repeat screening in five years will be made. Cytology will be performed if the patient has presented with symptoms of cervical disease or is undergoing management of a cervical abnormality.
- If HPV is **detected**, a reflex Liquid Based Cytology (LBC) (ThinPrep) will be performed on the same specimen.

There will be a combined report for HPV and Cytology (LBC) results, which includes a risk category and the recommended management, in line with the guidelines. There are three risk categories:

- Patients who are classified as **Low risk** are routinely invited to re-screen in five years.
- Patients who are classified as **Intermediate risk** are routinely invited to have another HPV test in 12 months. This is to check that the infection has cleared.
- Patients classified as **Higher risk** are routinely referred directly to colposcopy for further investigation.



Suggested citation: Cancer Council Australia Cervical Cancer Screening Working Party. Clinical pathway: Cervical screening pathway. National Cervical Screening Program: Guidelines for the management of screen detected abnormalities, screening in specific populations and investigation of abnormal vaginal bleeding. CCA 2016. Accessible from http://www.cancer.org.au/australia/guidelines/cervical_cancer/Screening. Updated January 2026.

Symptomatic patients

It is important to remember that **symptomatic patients** may have a cervical sample taken at any time, regardless of their age or screening history. Patients at any age who have signs or symptoms suggestive of cervical cancer, or its precursors, will have a co-test (LBC and HPV). The presence and type of symptoms should be clearly noted on the request form to ensure cytological examination is performed on these specimens.

Age for first HPV screening

The guidelines advise that both HPV vaccinated and unvaccinated patients from the ages of 25 to 74 years should participate.

The age range is based on evidence that cervical cancer in young patients is rare and screening patients younger than 25 years of age has not altered the number of cervical cancer cases or deaths in this group. This measure also prevents the over-treatment of common cervical abnormalities in young patients, which usually resolve naturally.

In addition, HPV vaccination has already and will continue to show a significant reduction of these abnormalities amongst patients in this age bracket. If a screening participant under the age of 25 is symptomatic, an HPV test can be requested that will be covered as an MBS item.

How to order a Cervical Screening Test

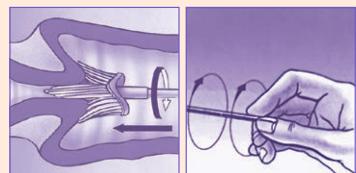
Patient presents as	Context	Age	Sample type	Test type	What to write on the pathology request form
Asymptomatic	National Cervical Screening Program routine five-yearly screening • Only 1 of this MBS item is claimable in a 57-month period	≥ 24yrs & 9mths	Cervical	HPV test	Cervical Screening Test (CST)
Asymptomatic	Screening in specific populations • Immune-deficient • Early sexual debut, prior to 14 years and not vaccinated prior to sexual debut (only 1 claimable between 20 and 24 years of age)	Any age	Cervical	HPV test	• HPV test, Immune-deficient • HPV test, Early debut HPV
	Follow-up test claimable after previous positive screening test (12-month repeat)	Any age	Cervical	HPV test	Follow-up HPV test
Follow-up or post-treatment for clinical management:					
	Following treatment of HSIL (also called “test of cure”)	Any age	Cervical	HPV test	Test of cure
			Vaginal	Self-collect	Self collect test of cure
			Vault	Self-collect	Self collect test of cure
	Following treatment of AIS	Any age	Cervical	Co-test	Co-test post AIS
			Vault	Co-test	Co-test post AIS
	DES exposed in utero	Any age	Cervical	Co-test	DES exposure
			Vault	Co-test	DES exposure
Symptomatic	For investigation of symptoms, e.g. abnormal bleeding	Any age	Cervical	Co-test	Co-test or HPV & LBC, Symptomatic (specify)
Follow-up for HPV+ self-collect	Only claimable within 21 months following the detection of oncogenic HPV (any type) on a self-collected screening test	>24 years and 9 months	Vaginal	LBC	HPV+ self-collect follow-up
Repeat test following an unsatisfactory test	Following an unsatisfactory test • Only claimable when preceded by another cervical or vaginal MBS item	Any age	Cervical	HPV test	HPV test, previous result unsatisfactory
			Vaginal	HPV test	HPV test, previous result unsatisfactory
			Cervical	LBC	LBC, previous result unsatisfactory

ThinPrep® HPV Collection Instructions

Collect

To obtain an adequate sample, insert the central bristles of the brush into the endocervical canal. Apply sufficient pressure to gently bend the lateral bristles against the ectocervix and rotate completely three to five times in a clockwise direction.

If a lubricant must be used, it should be applied sparingly on the outer portion of the speculum with great care to avoid the tip.



Rinse

Rinse the brush in the PreservCyt® Solution vial by pushing it down against the bottom 10 times, forcing the bristles apart. Discard the collection device.

Do not leave the head of the Cervex Brush in the vial. Replace the cap and tighten it so that the small black mark passes the corresponding line on the vial.



Record

Record the patient's name and date of birth on the vial, and their details and medical history on the pathology request form. Place both the vial and request form in the enclosed specimen collection bag for transport to Australian Clinical Labs.



Further Testing - Screening for Common STIs

The first Cervical Screening Test at 25 years of age is an ideal opportunity to screen for common STIs, as chlamydia and gonorrhoea testing can be performed on the same ThinPrep vial used to collect the Cervical Screening sample. No extra specimen collection is required.

Our expert pathologist

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A Fellow with the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia, Dr Uzzell has an interest in patients' health and gynaecological pathology and cytology. She has over 13 years of experience in reporting cytology, with particular emphasis on gynaecological cytology, and has presented to many general practice and specialist groups regarding changes to the Cervical Screening Program. Dr Uzzell has a special interest in Dermatopathology and is a member of the Australasian Dermatopathology Society.