Cervical Cancer

Every year in the UK, over 2,800 women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer and nearly 1,000 women will die from the disease. After breast cancer, cervical cancer is the second most common cancer in women aged 35 and under.

Cervical cancer is not thought to be hereditary.
Cervical cancer, in 99.7% of cases, is caused by persistent infection with a virus called human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is a very common virus transmitted through skin to skin contact in the genital area. Up to 80% of people of reproductive age will be infected with HPV at some point in their lives. However, for the majority of women this will not result in cervical cancer. Cervical cancer is rare while HPV infection is common.

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is an extremely common virus. At some point in our life most of us will catch the virus. The world over, HPV is the most widespread sexually transmitted infection; 80% (four out of five) of the world's population will contract the some type of the virus once.

If you catch HPV, in the majority of cases the body's immune system will clear or get rid of the virus without the need for further treatment. In fact you may not even know that you had contracted the virus.

There are over one hundred identified strains of HPV; each different type has been assigned a number. HPV infects the skin and mucosa (any moist membranes such as the lining of the mouth and throat, the cervix and the anus). Different strains affect different parts of the body and cause different types of lesions.

Around forty of the HPV strains affect the genital areas of men and women, including the skin of the penis, vulva (area outside the vagina), and anus, and the linings of the vagina, cervix, and rectum. In women, around 20 of these strains are oncogenic (cancer causing) and associated with the development of cervical cancer.

A person infected with high-risk genital HPV will show no symptoms so they may never even know they have it. The remaining genital HPV types have been designated low-risk as they do not cause cervical cancer but they cause other problems such as genital warts.

Cervical screening (smear test) is a method of examining cells from the cervix in order to detect abnormalities that might become cancerous in the future. A sample of cells is taken from the cervix and placed in liquid so that it can be analysed in the laboratory. This is called liquid based cytology (LBC). The results of screening allow changes in the cells of the cervix to be monitored. Screening can detect pre-

cancerous/abnormal cells and the detection and successful treatment of these cells can often prevent the occurrence of cancer.

These abnormalities in the cells of the cervix are generally caused by certain types of HPV. Cervical screening is NOT a test for cancer. Instead it is a screening test to detect abnormalities (pre-cancer) at an early stage in the cells in the cervix.