Patient information

East and North Hertfordshire Teaching NHS Trust

Colposcopy

What is a colposcopy?

A colposcopy is a simple procedure used to look at the cervix, the lower part of the womb at the top of the vagina. It's often done if cervical screening (a smear test) finds abnormal cells in your cervix. A colposcopy can confirm whether cells in your cervix, and vagina or vulva (the skin at the opening of the vagina) are abnormal and determine whether you need treatment to remove these cells.

The instrument used is called a colposcope and it is really just a large magnifying glass which lets the colposcopist look more closely at the changes on your cervix, vagina or vulva. For most women this is a painless examination, but some may find it a bit uncomfortable, similar to a cervical screening test.

Why have I been referred for a colposcopy?

You may have been referred for colposcopy because a cervical screening test you had has shown evidence of abnormal cells or high-risk HPV. This does not mean that you have cancer. Usually low grade changes do not need treatment and often return to normal on their own. We do know that some of these cell changes can go on to form cancer if left untreated, over 10-20 years, and it is for this reason that a colposcopy, and possibly treatment, is advised.

Some women are referred by their GP because of uncertainty about the appearance of the cervix, vagina, or vulva, or because a satisfactory smear cannot be obtained. Another reason for referral for a colposcopy would be if you are experiencing bleeding after sexual intercourse.

What if I am due for a period or have one as I am to attend the colposcopy appointment?

If you are due for a period and you are taking the contraceptive pill, it is advisable to continue the pill back-to-back for the current cycle to delay your period, or see your GP regarding the use of Norethisterone to do this. If you are bleeding heavily, please call the nurse colposcopist for further advice and to reschedule the appointment, if necessary (see page 4 for contact details). If the bleeding is very light, a satisfactory colposcopy may still be possible.

Colposcopy can be done safely during pregnancy and will not affect delivery of your baby, nor will it affect your ability to become pregnant in the future. It is important therefore that you attend your appointment.

What do I need to do on the day of the colposcopy?

- It is advisable to take some mild painkillers, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, about 1 hour before your appointment time to help with the mild discomfort you may feel.
- You can eat and drink as normal, in fact, we encourage a meal as usual before the procedure.
- You will have to undress from your waist down so it's best to wear separates for your clinic visit, i.e. skirt or trousers and a longer or loose top which may help to make you feel less embarrassed.
- Please do not apply cream or body lotion to your legs because of the equipment being used.
- Please bring a sanitary towel with you to use afterwards.

Each appointment lasts about half an hour, but the procedure itself lasts only a few minutes.

What can I expect to happen?

The colposcopy nursing team will help you position yourself on the special couch, which has supports for your legs. When you are lying comfortably, the colposcopist will gently insert an instrument called a speculum into your vagina (the same as when you had your cervical screening test). The examination will last slightly longer than a cervical screening test as the colposcopist will be looking at the cervix through the colposcope, which does not go inside you.

The cervix will be washed with two fluids, which will help identify where the abnormal cells are coming from. It is possible for you to see your cervix on a screen if you want to look and the colposcopist can talk you through any abnormalities. The colposcopist will explain if any further tests are needed, either a biopsy (small sample of tissue to be taken) or a treatment.

What if I need a biopsy?

This is a very small sample of tissue that is sent off for further testing. More than one may be needed. You may feel a slight pinch when the biopsy is taken. This will cause a small amount of bleeding, to which solutions will be applied to stop the bleeding. After the examination you may experience a slight discharge from the solutions used during the examination and some spotting from the area that the biopsy was taken. Please use a sanitary towel during this time only, and not a tampon.

What if I need treatment?

Usually the treatment is performed at your first visit, which there are several equally effective methods available. The treatment is being performed to remove the abnormality with the view to return your cervix to normal and to stop these changes progressing on to a cancer in the future. Abnormal cells can be found on the surface, or inside the canal of the cervix. Our nursing team will be there to help relax and reassure you throughout the procedures.

One of the treatments is called **Large Loop Excision of the Transformation Zone (LLETZ)**. This involves using a fine wire loop to remove all the abnormal cells as a biopsy specimen and a cure. This treatment only takes seconds, and is performed under local anaesthetic, which works very quickly.

Another type of treatment that we use is called the **'cold' coagulator** or **diathermy with a ball**. These treatments may be used to stop any bleeding after the LLETZ treatment and may be used to treat your cervix if you are experiencing bleeding after sexual intercourse.

Occasionally, treatment may need to be performed under a light general anaesthetic. This will be fully discussed with you following your colposcopy examination.

We do not treat abnormal cells during pregnancy but wait until 12 weeks after delivery. However, we do perform a colposcopy and it is important for you to attend for this. Rarely, we may feel that it is important to take a biopsy. This is very unlikely to upset a normal pregnancy.

A coil (IUCD) does not prevent successful treatment. If the threads are cut during the treatment you may need to return to hospital when it is time to remove or change the coil. If you would like this removed prior to the treatment, please abstain from intercourse or use extra precautions 7 days prior to your appointment.

Risks linked to treatment

There are a few small risks linked to the treatment. These include bleeding and infection but, if you follow the aftercare advice, most people are fine. There is also a small risk that, as your cervix heals, the opening can become tight and closed (stenosis), this is more likely to happen if you are not having regular periods anymore. This will be picked up when your follow-up cervical screening test is due, but if your periods do stop following the treatment and you start to experience some abdominal pain, please contact the nurse colposcopist for further advice.

The other small risk is for future pregnancies; your baby may be delivered slightly early (pre-term labour). However, any women that becomes pregnant has this risk regardless if they have had treatment to their cervix or not, but there is a link that this could slightly increase this risk. It is important in any future pregnancies for you to inform your midwife that you have had a treatment to your cervix, so they are aware.

Any further questions?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your condition or treatment, please contact the Colposcopy Clinic or your GP. Contact details are on page 4.

Further information

Smoking

There is good evidence that smoking is associated with changes in the cervix. If you live, work, or are registered with a GP in Hertfordshire, you can access free stop smoking support methods with Hertfordshire Stop Smoking Service. You can refer yourself or you can ask a member of staff to refer you.

- **Stop Smoking Service**
  https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/health-in-herts/smoking/stop-smoking-service.aspx
  - Telephone 0800 3899 3998
  - Text 'SMOKEFREE' to 80818

- **NHS Website for England**
  https://www.nhs.uk/tests-and-treatments/colposcopy/

Useful contact details

East and North Hertfordshire Teaching NHS Trust:

- Website www.enherts-tr.nhs.uk
- Telephone 01438 314333

Colposcopy Team:

- Telephone 01438 286177

Colposcopy Nurse:

- Telephone 07554 337989

Colposcopy Appointments:

- Telephone 01438 286171 (Monday to Friday, 8.30am - 4.30pm)

Leaflet information

You can request this information in a different format or another language; please speak to your doctor or nurse.

Date of publication: August 2015
Version number: 7
Author: M Grant, D Tun
Reference: Gynaecology (ENH00127)
Review Date: January 2029

© East and North Hertfordshire Teaching NHS Trust
www.enherts-tr.nhs.uk