

Evidence Summary of a Systematic Review

Who is this summary for?

For Doctors and Health Personnel, Administrators and Managers of health facilities

Cytology versus HPV testing for cervical cancer screening in the general population

Background

The Human papillomavirus (HPV) test and the Pap test are tests that a doctor performs to check for the development of cervical cancer or lesions that would grow into a cancer. These lesions can develop into cervical cancer within about 10 to 20 years. The HPV test checks whether a woman has an HPV infection which may lead to cervical cancer. If the HPV test is positive, it may mean that there are lesions that would grow into a cancer in the cervix. There are many types of HPV tests. One of them is called the HC2 test. The Pap test checks for whether cells in the cervix are abnormal. Abnormal cervical cells graded as 'low grade to high grade' may mean that there are changes in the cervix that may lead to cervical cancer. There are two types of Pap test: conventional cytology and liquid-based cytology. Depending on the results of the test, a woman may need to have the cervix examined or could receive surgery to have the lesions removed.

Questions

Which of test, HPV (Human papillomavirus test) or Pap test (Papanicolaou test), detects precancerous changes of the cervix more accurately?

Key findings

- For every 1000 women screened, around 20 women will have precancerous changes. HPV test will correctly identify 16 of these 20 women and will miss 4 while the Pap test will correctly identify 12 women and miss 8 of them.
- The women who are missed could develop cervical cancer
- For women screened who will not have precancerous changes (980), the HPV test will correctly identify 879 women and 101 women will be incorrectly told that they have a lesion while the Pap test will correctly identify 951 women and 29 will be incorrectly told that they have a lesion
- Women who are incorrectly told that they have a lesion may have their cervix examined or may receive surgery unnecessarily.

Best practice recommendations

- Human papillomavirus (HPV) testing is useful in screening for cancer and lesions that would grow into cancer. It results in less false-negative results than the Pap test.

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