

The Colposcopy Procedure

Information for patients



Leeds Centre for
Women's Health

You have been invited to have a Colposcopy at Leeds Teaching Hospitals.

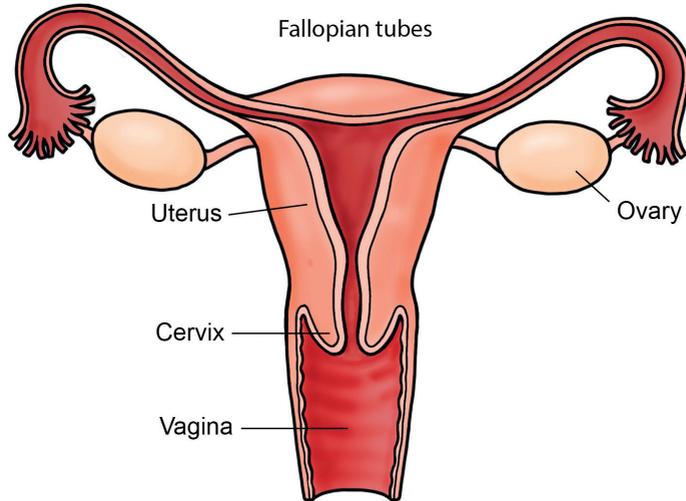
This leaflet explains the different indications for Colposcopy and the Colposcopy procedure. You will have the opportunity to discuss your care and treatment with a member of the Colposcopy team at your visit.

If you would like a female nurse or doctor to carry out your Colposcopy, please call the clinic to request this when you receive your appointment as this might not be always possible to provide when you arrive at the clinic.

What is the NHS Cervical Screening Programme?

This programme was set up in 1988 to reduce the chances of women developing cervical cancer. It aims to screen all women between the age of 25 and 64 years old. If you are between 25-49 years old, you will be screened every three years. If you are between 50-64 years, you will be screened every five years. The programme is very successful.

The screening programme aims to pick up abnormal cell changes on the cervix. A colposcopy examination is the only way to check these changes and offers the benefit of a quick and easy treatment if necessary, usually in the clinic.



Why have I been referred for a colposcopy?

You have been asked to come for further examination for one of the following reasons:

1. Your cervical screening test has found evidence of abnormal cells. These abnormal changes are known as dyskaryosis.

What is dyskaryosis?

This is a term given to the abnormal changes. These changes are not cancer. Low grade changes (often called low grade dyskaryosis, mild or borderline changes) will often return to normal on their own. High grade changes (known as moderate or severe dyskaryosis) or abnormal glandular cells (also known as glandular dyskaryosis) are less likely to return to normal by themselves and usually act as an early warning that over time cervical cancer may develop if they are not removed.

2. If you have had a cervical screening test which has detected the persistent presence of high risk human papilloma virus (HPV); or as follow up to cervical treatment and it has detected the human papilloma virus (HPV) or further abnormal cells, you will be asked to come to colposcopy for further assessment.

What is HPV?

This virus is an extremely common virus. Four out of five people have genital (penis, vulva, anus, vagina, cervix and rectum) HPV at some point in their lives but will never know they have it as they will show no symptoms. Genital HPV is transmitted primarily by skin to skin contact. It is not possible to determine when you may have come into contact with this virus.

There are over 100 types of HPV. Around 40 of the HPV types affect the genital areas of men and women. Around 13 of these types are thought to be associated with the development of cancer and so are called high risk. The remaining genital HPV types have been called low risk as they do not cause cervical cancer, but they can cause other problems such as genital warts. HPV is usually cleared (without treatment) by the body's natural immune system. However, a small percentage of people do not clear the HPV and it can remain 'dormant' (inactive) or persistent in some bodies for many years. Smoking is an important co-factor in the persistence of abnormality on the cervix. Smoking lowers the immune system making it less likely that the human papilloma virus will disappear from the body on its own.

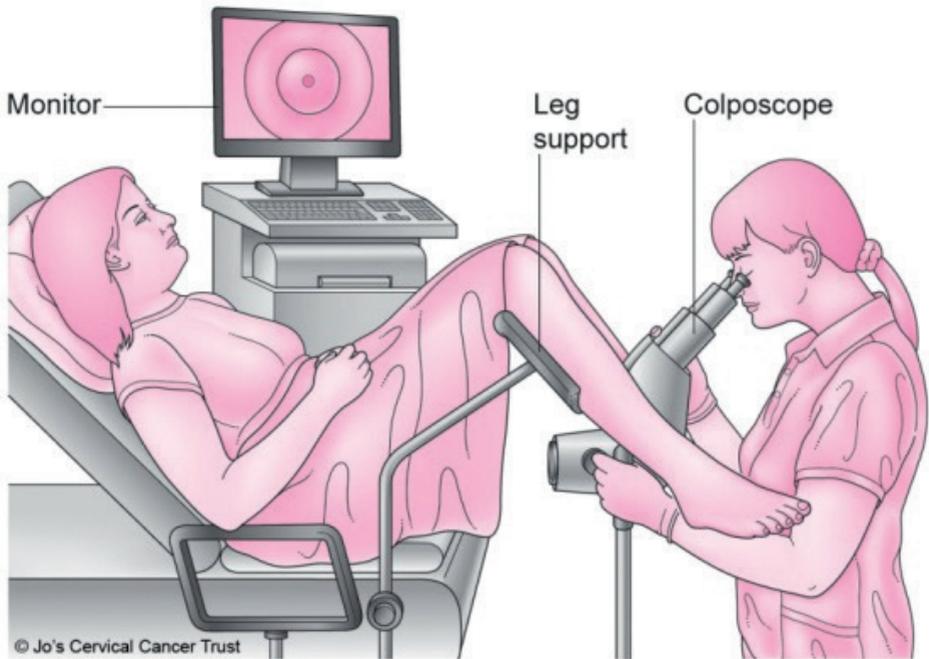
3. A number of your cervical screening tests are reported as inadequate. These tests are not abnormal but show that the laboratory was not able to report the result. This is usually because there were not enough cells to assess. When this happens a number of times, it is best to have a colposcopy to check that your cervix is healthy.
4. Other signs and symptoms not related to having a cervical screening test. You may be experiencing unusual symptoms such as bleeding after sexual intercourse or in between your periods which may be related to the health of your cervix. Your GP / Community Nurse may also refer you if they are concerned about the appearance of your cervix.

What is a colposcopy?

Having a colposcopy is similar to having a cervical screening test. The examination on average should take no longer than 30 minutes. You will be required to undress from your waist down and lie down on a special couch that supports your legs.

The colposcopist will place lubricant on a speculum and place it in to your vagina (this is the same as when you had a cervical screening test). The speculum will be opened gently allowing the colposcopist to see your cervix.

The colposcope (which put simply is binoculars on a stand) will be used to allow the colposcopist to visualise your cervix. The colposcope does not enter the vagina and does not touch the skin.



The colposcopist will then place a liquid (acetic acid) onto the cervix using cotton wool - this may feel cold and sometimes sting a little. This liquid highlights any abnormalities on the cells of the cervix to the colposcopist.

It may be required at this time for the colposcopist to take a punch biopsy or carry out treatment on the cervix (known as Large Loop Excision of the Transformation Zone or LLETZ for short).

What is a punch biopsy?

A punch biopsy is a tiny piece of tissue taken from the cervix and sent to the pathologist so that it can be examined closely to see if there are changes in the cells. You would not normally require local anaesthetic. The biopsy is about the size of a grain of rice. You may have a brown or red discharge from your vagina for anything up to a week following this. You may also experience some 'period-like' discomfort for the next few hours. You should take simple pain relief to ease this, please read the instructions and do not exceed the recommended dose.

Is there anything I need to know before I have a colposcopy?

- There is no need to avoid sexual intercourse before your colposcopy examination, unless you have a coil fitted.
- You can eat and drink as normal. We encourage you to have eaten some food before your appointment.
- You may wish to take simple pain relieving medication 30 minutes to one hour before the examination to help prevent / reduce any "period-like discomfort" that may occur following the procedure. Please be aware of the recommended dose, do not exceed this.
- Bring a list of any medication you are taking and let the colposcopist know of any medical history and allergies.
- Please make a note of when you had your last period.
- You will be asked to remove your clothing from below the waist. You may wish to consider how you dress the day of your appointment, for comfort. Taking into consideration comfortable underwear for after the procedure.

- If you require treatment during your appointment, you may have to remove any jewellery you have below the waist. You can do this before your appointment or at your appointment. You can discuss this further with the colposcopist if needed.
- After the examination, you will experience some discharge from your vagina. Although we will provide a sanitary pad for you at this time, you are more than welcome to bring your own sanitary pad / panty liner with you if you would prefer.
- You should be able to drive home afterwards. You may feel you wish to bring someone with you in case you do not feel well enough to drive after your appointment.
- You might find it helpful to write down any questions that you have for the Doctor or Nurse colposcopist.
- You are welcome to bring a relative or friend with you to your appointment. They are welcome to stay with you throughout your consultation / examination if you wish them to.

What will happen during my appointment?

When you arrive in the clinic, we aim to see you as close to your appointment time as possible, but please be patient if there are delays that we could not have expected beforehand. We will endeavour to keep you informed at all times of any delays in the clinic. You will then be called for your colposcopy, where you will meet the colposcopist (who may be a doctor or nurse specialist) and the support nurse(s) who will be with you during the examination.

During the colposcopy appointment, the colposcopist will ask you some questions, take down your medical history and explain the procedure to you. Following this, the support nurse(s) will show you to the examination couch and help you to prepare for the colposcopy. The colposcopist will then carry out the examination.

How long your appointment takes will depend on whether any procedures are necessary, but it usually takes no longer than 20 to 30 minutes.

What if I need treatment, known as Large Loop Excision of the Transformation Zone (LLETZ)?

The aim of treatment is to remove abnormal cells allowing healthy cells to replace them. Treatment can usually be done in the colposcopy clinic as an outpatient on your first appointment. We would expect you to go home and rest following treatment.

If you have a coil fitted, please use extra form of contraception for seven days before your appointment, as sometimes it is necessary to remove the coil before you have the treatment.

Large Loop Excision of the Transformation Zone (LLETZ)

This treatment uses an electric current to remove abnormal tissue from your cervix. Local anaesthetic (similar to the one you have at the dentist) is used to numb the cervix, and the abnormal cells are then lifted off the cervix using a wire loop.

To aid the smooth running of the equipment a small pad will be placed onto an area of your skin (this is usually your upper leg). During the procedure, you will hear various noises from the machinery. Occasionally patients report a feeling of heat from the area in which we are working (the cervix), there should be no pain. Due to the nature of the equipment patients may experience an odour in the room this is due to the area of tissue being removed and is nothing to be concerned about.

The examination and treatment last roughly 15 minutes. Afterwards, you will be given a sanitary pad (or you may wish to bring your own) and asked to rest in our recovery area for a short period of time (roughly 15 - 30 minutes) before leaving.

What will the treatment show?

The technical term used to refer to cell changes confirmed by a biopsy or LLETZ is Cervical Intra-epithelial Neoplasia, more commonly known as CIN.

To make distinctions between the various stages of changes in the cells, doctors have developed an increasing scale from 1 -3 according to how many cells are affected. So, results will most commonly be **CIN 1, CIN 2 or CIN 3**. Depending on the results, this will determine what follow up is required.

What normally happens after punch biopsy / LLETZ treatment?

Most women will feel okay after punch biopsy / LLETZ treatment. In a very small number of cases, people may experience the following;

- Dizziness or feeling faint following the examination. If this happens to you, the nurse will ask you to lie down and will keep you under close observation either in the examination room or recovery area until you have fully recovered.
- 'Period-like' pain following punch biopsy or a few hours following LLETZ. You should take simple pain relief to ease the discomfort / pain you are experiencing. Please be aware of the recommended dose, do not exceed this.
- It is normal to have some blood stained discharge following examination, biopsy and / or LLETZ. Do not use tampons, instead use sanitary pads or panty liners. You should not use tampons following a punch biopsy for one week. You should not use tampons following LLETZ treatment until four weeks after your procedure. Do not worry if you do not experience any discharge.
- You should avoid sexual intercourse for four weeks following a LLETZ treatment to allow the cervix to heal. Following punch biopsy, we would recommend one week or until the discharge / bleeding has stopped.
- You should avoid any heavy lifting or vigorous exercise for a day or so after punch biopsy / LLETZ treatment.
- You should avoid swimming following LLETZ treatment for at least two weeks or at least until the discharge has stopped due to the risk of infection.

- Showers are better than baths and we would recommend this for at least two weeks following LLETZ treatment. With punch biopsy we would recommend a few days, or at least until the bleeding has stopped.
- Your fertility will not be affected following the removal of these abnormal cells. In recent research there has been shown to be a small increased risk of preterm delivery (delivering a baby before 37 weeks) and miscarriage however each person's cervix is different, and each treatment is different. If you have any concerns about this, please discuss this further with your colposcopist / specialist.

Results of biopsy / LLETZ

We will send you a letter with your results to your home address. If you have not received this letter 6 - 8 weeks after your appointment date, we would advise you to contact the clinic directly.

Cervical Cancer

Rarely, some people having a colposcopy examination, biopsy and/or LLETZ treatment are found to have cervical cancer. If you are found to have a cancer you may be called with an appointment to attend the colposcopy clinic to discuss your results face to face. Most early cancers found are successfully removed with the LLETZ treatment.

Rare complications with LLETZ treatment

A small number of patients may suffer a pain in their pelvis or experience heavy bleeding vaginally (from the treated area).

This may happen immediately after treatment or within the next couple of weeks.

This may be an indication that you have an infection, particularly if you have a temperature or strong-smelling discharge. It is very important that you contact your General Practitioner (GP) or Gynaecology Assessment Unit (telephone number will be provided at your colposcopy appointment) as you may require examination and/or antibiotics.

Will I need to have check-ups?

Yes. It is important to keep your appointments to make sure that your cervix is healthy. Most colposcopy clinics recommend that you have a follow up 6-12 months after examination or treatment, although this does depend on your results. Often these check-ups are back with your own General Practitioner (GP) however they may also be at the colposcopy clinic. We will write to you with the results and follow up plan. It is very important to complete the follow up programme as this allows us to check that your cervix stays healthy.

Practical questions

What should I do if I have a period on the day of my colposcopy appointment?

We would encourage you to attend your appointment despite this. However, if your period flow is heavy you may wish to ring the clinic to check if it would be more appropriate to re-arrange your appointment. If you feel awkward about having an examination during your appointment, please do not hesitate to contact us to change the date and time of your appointment.

Can I have sex in the week before I have a colposcopy?

You do not need to avoid sexual intercourse before you have a colposcopy, unless you have a coil fitted. If this is the case, please use an extra method of contraception for seven days before your appointment, as sometimes it is necessary to remove the coil before you have treatment.

What happens if I am pregnant or think I might be?

It is important that you keep your colposcopy appointment. A colposcopy can be carried out quite safely during pregnancy, but any investigations will usually be postponed until after the pregnancy. When you come for your appointment, we can discuss this further with you.

Will having a colposcopy affect my fertility or sex life?

Having a colposcopy does not affect either of these. However, different procedures / treatments may have different effects and we will be happy to discuss this with you further at your appointment. If you have LLETZ treatment you will have to avoid sexual intercourse for four weeks.

Can I travel abroad following LLETZ treatment?

We would recommend that you do not travel abroad in the four weeks following your LLETZ treatment as you would not be covered by travel insurance, should you need medical attention while you are abroad, for a complication following your LLETZ treatment. We can discuss this further at your appointment if necessary.

Contact and location details

If you have any questions about your referral or treatment, you can telephone the colposcopy clinic to speak to one of our nurses / nurse colposcopists:

St James' University Hospital, Beckett Street, Leeds, LS9 7TF
Chancellors Wing, Level 1
Gynaecology Out Patients, Colposcopy Department
Telephone Number - **0113 206 6424**

Wharfedale Hospital, Newall Carr Road, Otley, LS21 2LY
North Entrance, Ground floor, Out Patient Department
Telephone Number – **0113 392 1559**

Further information

You can find more information on cervical screening on the National Screening website at:

www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervical

Sources used for this information leaflet:

Jo's Trust Online: **www.jostrust.org.uk**

NHS website: **www.nhs.uk/conditions/colposcopy**

Public Health England, Colposcopy and programme management guidelines for the NHS cervical screening programme, fourth edition, February 2020:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/cervical-screening

With thanks to Jo's Trust for the use of their image on page six.



What did you think of your care?

Scan the QR code or visit bit.ly/nhsleedsfft

Your views matter



© The Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust • 1st edition (Ver 2)
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Produced by: Medical Illustration Services • MID code: 20220801_012/MH

LN004577
Publication date
06/2022
Review date
06/2024