

# The use of liquid-based cytology for cervical screening

## Understanding NICE guidance – information for the public

This guidance replaces technology appraisal  
guidance on this topic that was issued in  
June 2000

October 2003



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**The use of liquid-based cytology for cervical screening**  
**Understanding NICE guidance – information for the public**

**Issue date:** October 2003

**Review date:** August 2006

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Copies of this booklet can be ordered from the NHS Response Line; telephone 0870 1555 455 and quote reference number N0298. A version in Welsh and English is also available, reference number N0299. Mae fersiwn yn Gymraeg ac yn Saesneg ar gael hefyd, rhif cyfeirnod N0299. The NICE technology appraisal on which this information is based, *The use of liquid-based cytology for cervical screening*, is available from the NICE website ([www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)). Copies can also be obtained from the NHS Response Line, reference number N0296.

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Web: [www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

ISBN: 1-84257-370-5

Published by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence  
October 2003

Typeset by Icon Design, Eton

Printed by Abba Litho Sales Limited, London

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## What is NICE guidance?

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) is part of the NHS. It produces guidance (recommendations) on the use of medicines, medical equipment, diagnostic tests and clinical and surgical procedures within the NHS in England and Wales.

To produce this guidance, NICE looks at how well the medicine, equipment or procedure works and also how well it works in relation to how much it costs. This process is called an appraisal. The appraisal process involves the manufacturer of the medicine or equipment for which guidance is being produced and the organisations that represent the healthcare professionals, patients and carers who will be affected by the guidance.

NICE was asked to look at the available evidence on the use of liquid-based cytology, which is a way of processing samples for cervical screening. NICE was asked to provide guidance that will help the NHS in England and Wales decide when this technique should be used.

## What is cervical screening?

Cervical screening is a way of checking women regularly for changes in the cells in the cervix (neck of the womb). Currently, the 'smear test' is used for cervical screening. Women aged 20–64 years have the test every 3–5 years (depending on local arrangements). (The proper name for the standard smear test is the Papanicolaou test – usually shortened to Pap test.) A GP or nurse uses a small plastic spatula to collect cells from a woman's cervix. These are then sent to the laboratory where they are put onto a microscope slide and looked at under a microscope. The person looking at the cells checks for ones showing early signs that they might develop into cancer cells (these are known as 'pre-cancerous cells'). A woman with pre-cancerous cells won't have any symptoms, and the only way to detect these cells is by cervical screening.

At the moment, around 1 in 10 smear tests have to be repeated at a later date. This is because when the sample gets checked under the microscope, the person checking it isn't able to see whether pre-cancerous cells are there or not. This might be because of problems with the smear sample or with the preparation of the sample in the laboratory.

## What is liquid-based cytology?

Liquid-based cytology is a new way of collecting and preparing cell samples from a woman's cervix. Samples are collected using a brush-like device rather than a spatula. The head of the brush is rinsed or broken off into a container of preservative fluid that protects the cervical cells. The container is then sent to the laboratory. In the laboratory the samples are mixed to give an even blend of cervical cells, and any debris (such as blood or mucus) is removed. A thin layer of cervical cells is then put onto a microscope slide and examined.

This method may result in slides that are of better quality and easier to read, reducing the amount of tests that need to be repeated.

## **What has NICE recommended?**

NICE has recommended that liquid-based cytology should be used as the main way of preparing samples of cervical cells for cervical screening in the NHS in England and Wales.

NICE has not recommended one product for liquid-based cytology over another as it says that there is currently not enough information about the advantages and disadvantages of the different products.

## **What should I do?**

You might want to discuss this guidance with your doctor or nurse at your next appointment for cervical screening.

## **Will NICE review its guidance?**

Yes. The guidance will be reviewed in August 2006.

## Further information

The NICE website ([www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)) has further information about NICE and the full guidance on liquid-based cytology for cervical screening that has been issued to the NHS. The guidance can also be requested from the NHS Response Line by phoning 0870 1555 455 and quoting reference N0296.

If you have access to the Internet, you can find more information about cervical cancer and screening on the NHS Direct website ([www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)). You can also phone NHS Direct on 0845 46 47.









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