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Taking a cervical smear

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Ensure that you put your patient at her ease, as attending for a smear may be an anxious time for women. Introduce yourself and explain the procedure, then take her history. Ask the patient: When was your last period? When was your last cervical screening test? What were the results? Has she ever had any abnormal results? Is she pregnant or trying to conceive? (If she is pregnant, do not perform the smear test.) Is she using any contraceptive? Has she had any unusual discharge? Does she experience any pain during intercourse? Does she have any abnormal bleeding between periods or after/during sexual intercourse?

If available, draw the curtain to screen the patient as she undresses. Ask the patient to disrobe from the waist down. Offer the patient a disposable paper towel to protect modesty.

If the patient has a full bladder, then taking a cervical sample can be more uncomfortable for her. You should therefore ask her if she would like to go to the toilet.

Ask the patient if she would like a chaperone. If she confirms that she is comfortable being alone in the room with you, ask her if she is happy for you to lock the door.

If the patient has a full bladder, then taking a cervical sample can be more uncomfortable for her. You should therefore ask her if she would like to go to the toilet.

Take the patient’s history

Offer the patient the opportunity to go to the toilet

Offer the patient a chaperone

Patient position

Label the bottle

Fill in the specimen form

While the patient is undressing, prepare the labels and equipment. Fill in the label and apply it to the bottle.

Prepare the appropriate specimen form (you may be able to download it and print it) and fill in the patient’s details.
Prepare equipment

Clean a trolley or other surface (such as a tray) according to local policy. Lay out the equipment using a non-touch technique. Unwrap the equipment. Remove the lid from the specimen container, ready to receive the brush head. Lay the brush head on a clean surface such as the inside of the speculum wrapper (once you have unwrapped this) or a paper towel.

Wash your hands

Wash your hands and put on an apron and gloves. Raise the bed to a suitable height.

Reassure the patient

Explain to the patient that she is in charge of the procedure and that she can ask you to stop at any time. (If she is in discomfort, you can pause to allow her to relax down onto the speculum, or alternatively, you can stop altogether.)

Preparing the speculum

Open the lubricating gel, if using. Warm the speculum if required by holding it under a warm running tap. If using gel, avoid getting this on the tip of the speculum (inset), as this can affect the results. Smooth the gel over the front and back of the speculum.

Introduce the speculum: (a)

Adjust the light source to illuminate the vulva. Separate the labia and insert the speculum sideways into the vagina.

(b)

Aiming for the small of the back, gently push the speculum into the vagina until you meet some resistance, rotating it as you go until the handles are vertical. Avoid touching the clitoris with the handles.
Open the blades

Gently squeeze the handles together to open the blades of the speculum. Turn the screw clockwise to secure the blades into an open position. If you need to leave the room or the patient, first remove the speculum.

Identify the cervix

Adjust your light source and identify the cervix. Note any abnormalities (see page 6).

Introduce the brush

Insert the brush into the vagina and apply it to the cervix.

Rotate the brush five times

Rotate the brush clockwise against the cervix, throughout 360°. Perform five full rotations.

Insert the tip of the brush into the cervical os

Position the brush so that the tip is in the cervical os and the bristles are splayed out against the cervix but not collapsed.

Remove the brushhead

Remove the brush from the vagina and, with one hand, remove the brush head from the handle.

Do not undertake or attempt any procedure unless you are, or have supervision from, a properly trained, experienced and competent person. Always first explain the procedure to the patient and obtain his/her consent, in line with the policies of your employer or educational institution.
Deposit the brush head into the sample bottle

Deposit the brush head into the fluid in the bottle, with the bristles pointing downwards. Do not put the lid on yet.

Remove and dispose of gloves and then screw the lid on the bottle. It is important to remove your gloves first, to avoid contaminating the sample in accordance with infection control policies. Agitate the bottle, do not shake it.

Remove the speculum as soon as possible

Gently and slowly remove the speculum from the patient, taking care not to trap the vaginal wall between the blades as you close the speculum.

Dispose of equipment and wash your hands

Lower the bed and assist the patient to stand if necessary. Allow the patient to dress in private. Dispose of equipment and wash your hands. Tell the patient that she will receive the results in the post within 2 to 3 weeks.

Complete the specimen form

Either print off an electronic form or fill in the form stating that you have visualised the cervix and completed five 360° sweeps. It is mandatory to enter the details into your personal audit and any practice audit used (RCN, 2013). The log will be anonymised and will normally include the patient’s NHS number or date of birth, the date the sample was obtained, and information on results, presence of transformation zone (TZ) and “Any other comments”. If the practitioner’s results differ widely from his/her peers or the national average, retraining will take place (RCN, 2015).

Ensure delivery to the laboratory on the same day if possible, or as soon as possible, to help ensure that women receive their results within 14 days of attending for screening (NHS Improvement, 2009).
A normal cervix will look pink, smooth and healthy. In a nulliparous woman, the os is usually circular. In a multiparous woman, the os has the appearance of a horizontal slit.

The endocervix is inflamed and friable and bleeds easily on contact. There is often mucopurulent discharge which may be green or yellow. Swabs should be taken to exclude the presence of a sexually transmitted infection (see clinicalskills.net procedure, “Taking cervical swabs”).

The smear test detects cellular changes that could lead to abnormalities (intraepithelial neoplasia), which, if untreated, could develop into cancer. Such changes may also sometimes be visible to the naked eye, particularly if advanced.

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