

# Coming for a colposcopy examination

This leaflet aims to answer your questions about having colposcopy. It explains the benefits, risks and alternatives, as well as what you can expect when you come to hospital.

If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

## Why should I have colposcopy?

You should come to your appointment because it is very important for us to examine your cervix (neck of the womb). You may have been referred because of bleeding after sexual intercourse, or bleeding when your cervix was touched, for example when your cervical cytology sample/test (**also known as a smear test**) was taken. Alternatively your GP or practice nurse may have had a look at your cervix and decided that they want us to see you to examine your cervix more closely.

**If you are worried about coming to your appointment, please phone us on 020 7188 3691 and speak to one of the nurses who will be able to reassure you.**

You must make sure that you keep your appointment. It is important to look after your health, and if you do not attend your appointment and then decide that you would like to be seen after all, you will have to wait for another appointment, which could take up to **eight weeks**.

## Are there any alternatives to colposcopy?

There are no alternatives. If you are advised to have colposcopy, this is the only way that we can investigate your cervix and any possible symptoms you are experiencing.

## What happens during the colposcopy examination?

You will be seen in the Colposcopy unit which is located within the Gynaecology Outpatients department (McNair Centre) at Guy's Hospital.

As Guy's and St Thomas' is a teaching hospital, a medical or nursing professional may wish to observe the clinic on the day that you are there. We will always ask for your consent (permission) before allowing observations to take place. You can say no at any time, even if you have said yes before, and this will not affect your care in any way.

Before the examination, the colposcopist (the doctor or nurse performing the colposcopy examination) will ask you questions about your medical history. After the consultation with the colposcopist, you will be taken to the examination area where you will be asked to undress from the waist down (a loose skirt does not need to be removed). The nurse who is looking

after you and assisting the colposcopist will then help you to get into a comfortable position on the examination couch.

The colposcopy examination usually takes around 15–20 minutes.

During the examination an instrument called a speculum will be inserted into your vagina to hold back the vaginal walls and to show your cervix for the clinician to examine. The speculum is the same instrument that would have been inserted if/when you had a cervical cytology (smear) test before. The colposcopist then uses the colposcope, which is a type of magnifying glass that allows them to look closely at the cervix. No part of the colposcope goes inside you. The colposcopist **may** then take another cervical cytology test.

A liquid is then applied to the cervix to show the colposcopist any abnormal looking areas. They **may** then take one or two tiny samples of tissue (called biopsies) from your cervix. Some women say that the biopsy is painless, whilst others say that it hurts slightly and gives them crampy, period-like pains. This crampy pain often only lasts for a few minutes.

After the examination has finished, the speculum will be taken out and you will be asked to stay on the examination couch for a few minutes. The assisting nurse will then tell you when to get up and dressed. Once you are dressed you will go back to see the colposcopist who will talk to you about the examination.

You will then be able to go home / back to work.

If you have had samples taken (biopsies, swabs and cervical cytology tests) these are sent to the laboratory where they will be checked. A report will then be sent back to the colposcopist after a few weeks.

The colposcopist will write to you with the results within six weeks. You will be told whether we want to see you again, or if we are discharging you back to your GP.

## **I have my period. Can I still come to my appointment?**

We would certainly encourage you to come for your first colposcopy appointment even if you have your period. We can still do your colposcopy examination at this time.

However, if you have your period when you are coming back for a follow up appointment, please phone us on **020 7188 3691** so that we can give you further advice on whether or not you should attend your appointment.

## **I have a coil fitted (IUS / IUCD) fitted. Can I still have a colposcopy examination done?**

Yes you can.

## **I'm coming for a colposcopy examination. Can I still have sexual intercourse?**

Yes you can still have sexual intercourse whilst waiting for your colposcopy appointment.

## What if I am pregnant?

If you are pregnant and have had an abnormal cervical cytology result, we would still like to see you, but we may wait until you are more than 12 weeks pregnant. Please bring your antenatal notes with you to your appointment. A colposcopic examination can safely be performed when you are pregnant, however, you should phone us for further advice on **020 7188 3691**.

## Giving my consent (permission)

We want to involve you in all the decisions about your care and treatment. If you decide to go ahead with the colposcopy examination you will be asked to verbally agree to the procedure.

Remember, it is your decision. You can change your mind at any time, as long as it is before we actually undertake the treatment. Let staff know immediately if you change your mind. Your wishes will be respected at all times.

## What are the risks associated with colposcopy and treatment to the cervix?

There are no risks associated with having a colposcopy examination itself.

The following risks are associated with having a biopsy taken.

### Bleeding:

Following a small biopsy we would expect you to have some light bleeding for **up to seven days**. If you have had a small biopsy you will be advised not to have sexual intercourse for **up to seven days** following the procedure. Please remember to bring a sanitary pad with you to your appointment. We recommend that you do not use a tampon after a biopsy has been taken for **up to seven days**.

In the unlikely event that you have heavy bleeding, which is heavier than your normal period, or if you are passing blood clots, we would advise you to attend the accident and emergency (A&E) department at St Thomas', or your nearest A&E department. If you need further advice, please contact the colposcopy unit on **020 7188 3691**.

### Infection:

If you have a vaginal discharge which has an offensive (bad) smell following a biopsy, it may indicate that you have an infection. Please go to your GP, who may prescribe you antibiotics.

### Pain:

Most women say that the colposcopy examination is not actually painful. If anything, women report a slight degree of discomfort, and this is usually related to the speculum that we have to use to keep the vaginal walls open so that we can see your cervix. You may experience some pain if you have to have a biopsy – some women say that the biopsy is painless, whilst others say that it hurts slightly and gives them crampy period like pains. This crampy pain often only lasts for a few minutes.

## How can I prepare for a colposcopy examination or treatment?

You do not need to do anything specific to prepare for your colposcopy examination. You do not need to bring anyone with you, but a lot of women like to bring someone so that they have someone to talk to in the waiting room and take them home after the procedure if they are feeling unwell. It is unlikely that you'll feel unwell, but it does occasionally happen.

It is very important that you eat and drink before you come to the clinic. **Do not fast.** It is also a good idea to read the information leaflets that we give/send to you.

We advise all patients to allow **two hours** in the department from their appointment time. So if your appointment is at 2pm please arrive on time and ensure that you allow until at least 4pm. We do not anticipate you being in the department for the whole two hours. However we cannot foresee what may happen in any one clinic, and would rather you do not feel rushed after your appointment to get back to work, pick up your children, and so on.

If you are planning on going abroad soon after your appointment, please advise the colposcopist on the day of your appointment, so that we can plan your follow up and getting of results appropriately.

## What happens after a colposcopy examination?

If you have a colposcopy examination (including diagnostic biopsies) you should be able to go back to work that day.

## Will I have a follow-up appointment?

Once we have the results back from any samples we have taken we will write to you. We will tell you if and when we need to see you again, or if we are discharging you back to the care of your GP.

## What shall I do if I have a problem or concern?

If you have any concerns, please:

- contact or visit your GP
- call NHS Direct or NHS 111 (from your mobile phone or landline) and speak to a specially trained nurse
- go to your nearest accident and emergency (A&E) department or call 999 in the event of an emergency.

## Further information

**Websites** – The websites recommended below are run by cancer charities, but this does not mean that you have cancer. These websites are the ones we believe have the most detailed information which we hope may help you to answer more of your questions.

w: [www.cancerhelp.org.uk](http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk)

w: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

w: [www.jostrust.org.uk](http://www.jostrust.org.uk)

w: [cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org](http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org)

w: [www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervical](http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervical)

w: [www.bsccp.org.uk](http://www.bsccp.org.uk)

**Pharmacy Medicines Helpline**

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

**Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:

**t:** 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas'    **t:** 020 7188 8803 at Guy's    **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

**Knowledge & Information Centre (KIC)**

For more information about health conditions, support groups and local services, or to search the internet and send emails, please visit the KIC on the Ground Floor, North Wing, St Thomas' Hospital.

**t:** 020 7188 3416

**Language support services**

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.

**t:** 020 7188 8815    **fax:** 020 7188 5953

**NHS Choices**

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

**w:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

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Membership is free and it is completely up to you how much you get involved. To become a member of our Foundation Trust, you need to be 18 years of age or over, live in Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham, Wandsworth or Westminster or have been a patient at either hospital in the last five years. To join:

**t:** 0848 143 4017    **e:** [members@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:members@gstt.nhs.uk)

**w:** [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk)

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