**Healthy women in middle age 'only need a cervical test once every decade'**

* **BMJ study suggests women over 40 could avoid regular checks**
* **At the moment women aged 25-49 invited for screening every three years**
* **The new study was conducted on more than 43,000 Dutch women**
* **Screening programme slashed cervical cancer rates by 44% since 1970s**

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* [e-mail](mailto:?subject=Read%20this:%20Healthy%20women%20in%20middle%20age%20%27only%20need%20a%20cervical%20test%20once%20every%20decade%27&body=Healthy%20women%20in%20middle%20age%20%27only%20need%20a%20cervical%20test%20once%20every%20decade%27%0A%0AAt%20the%20moment%20women%20in%20Britain%20aged%20between%2025%20and%2049%20are%20invited%20for%20screening%20every%20three%20years%2C%20and%20when%20they%20are%20aged%2050%20to%2064%2C%20every%20five%20years.%0A%0Ahttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.dailymail.co.uk%2Fhealth%2Farticle-3822398%2FHealthy-women-middle-age-need-cervical-test-decade-Millions-avoid-regular-checks-passed-times-before.html%3Fito%3Demail_share_article-top%0A%0A%0AMost%20Read%20Articles%3A%0A%0ADr%20Pimple%20Popper%20bursts%20a%20huge%20cyst%20from%20the%20corner%20of%20a%20man%27s%20eye%20in%20possibly%20her%20most%20repulsive%20video%20yet%0Ahttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.dailymail.co.uk%2Fhealth%2Farticle-4028510%2FDr-Pimple-Popper-bursts-huge-cyst-corner-man-s-eye-possibly-repulsive-video-yet.html%3Fito%3Demail_share_article-top_most-read-articles%0A%0ATeenager%20whose%20painful%20skin%20condition%20left%20her%20covered%20in%20SCALES%2C%20bleeding%20and%20in%20agony%20is%20cured%20by%20a%20cancer%20drug%0Ahttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.dailymail.co.uk%2Fhealth%2Farticle-4028006%2FTeenager-painful-skin-condition-left-covered-SCALES-bleeding-agony-cured-cancer-drug.html%3Fito%3Demail_share_article-top_most-read-articles%0A%0ATom%2C%20who%20was%20so%20full%20of%20life%2C%20was%20killed%20in%20a%20tragic%20hockey%20accident%20at%20the%20age%20of%2022%3A%20Now%20his%20organs%20have%20helped%20up%20to%2050%20people%20in%20need%20of%20transplants%0Ahttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.dailymail.co.uk%2Fhealth%2Farticle-4026676%2FTom-life-killed-tragic-hockey-accident-age-22-organs-helped-FIFTY-people-need-transplant.html%3Fito%3Demail_share_article-top_most-read-articles%0A%0A)

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Healthy middle-aged women could soon be spared the ordeal of having to go so often for smear tests.

A major study published yesterday in the British Medical Journal suggests that women over the age of 40 could safely have cervical cancer testing just once a decade.

At the moment women in Britain aged between 25 and 49 are invited for screening every three years, and when they are aged 50 to 64, every five years.

But the new study, conducted on more than 43,000 Dutch women, concluded that if they had already passed the test several times, and were found to be free of a crucial virus linked to cervical cancer, slashing the frequency to once every ten years would be just as safe.

Experts on the UK National Screening Committee last night said they are reviewing the frequency at which women must have the tests for cervical cancer – with new proposals to be published next year.

Cervical smear tests, which involve taking a sample of cells from the neck of the womb, aim to spot pre-cancerous cells before they develop into tumours.

The national screening programme has been credited with slashing cervical cancer rates by 44 per cent since the 1970s.

Despite its successes, the number of women who attend is dropping, with one in five not taking up the offer of regular tests.

A study in the British Journal of Cancer found that if all women aged 25 to 64 regularly attended screening 83 per cent of all cervical cancer deaths could be prevented, compared with the current 70 per cent.

The smear test involves an intimate swab, which is thought to put many women off. Recent data suggests that older women in particular are not getting themselves tested, with uptake dropping off dramatically after the age of 50.

In England, 81.6 per cent of 50 to 54-year-olds attend smear tests, but this figure drops to 74.8 per cent of 55 to 59-year-olds, and 73.2 per cent of 60 to 64-year-olds.

The death of reality TV star Jade Goody from cervical cancer aged 27 in 2009 triggered a spike in the number of women attending screening – but that effect has faltered in recent years. Doctors are keen to reduce the frequency at which the tests have to be done if they can do so safely – in a bid to persuade more women to attend.

The Dutch researchers, from VU University Medical Centre in Amsterdam, said that once women had tested negative several times, the chance of developing cervical cancer reduced.

Their results come as health authorities in the Netherlands plan to reduce screening frequency for over-40s from once every five years to once every ten years from next year.

The scientists, who tracked the 43,400 women for 14 years, last night endorsed the Dutch government's decision. They wrote: 'Our data indicated that good safety for cervical cancer or [abnormal cells] is provided by extending the interval from five to ten years.'

Public Health England, which manages Britain's screening and vaccination programme, last night confirmed that UK officials are considering taking a similar step.

Scientists on the National Screening Committee are currently reviewing the current frequency of the smear test programme.

The screening programme in the UK is also set to change over the next few years. At the moment a smear test involves removing a number of cells on the cervix, and examining them for abnormalities.

If problems are seen, they are then tested for HPV – human papilloma virus – which causes 95 per cent of cases of cervical cancer.

In the future, doctors will test first for HPV, and then follow up with further tests of abnormal cells if the virus is present.

Evidence suggests this method will give more accurate results.

Dr Anne Mackie, Public Health England's director of screening said: 'The UK National Screening Committee is currently carrying out a review to identify how often a woman should be tested for HPV.

'A consultation on the review findings will begin next year.

'Testing for HPV first will be rolled out into the English cervical screening programme over the next few years and we are currently working with NHS colleagues to ensure an effective implementation into the existing screening programme.'

Robert Music, chief executive of Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust welcomed the findings.

He said: 'The bottom line is that screening is going down and we need to do more to get women in to the screening programme in the first place.

'We fully welcome the implementation of HPV primary screening in England as evidence has shown it to have a much higher detection rate than cytology and to be a more reliable indicator of women at greater risk of developing cervical cancer.

'For those less at risk research is pointing towards the potential for increasing the time between cervical screening.

'However HPV Primary Screening has only just been introduced and is still being rolled out so we must wait to see what the data shows before making any changes to our screening programme.'

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-3822398/Healthy-women-middle-age-need-cervical-test-decade-Millions-avoid-regular-checks-passed-times-before.html#ixzz4So90g7T0>   
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