

Thermal Ablation (“Cold Coagulation”) of the Cervix

Information and advice for patients

Colposcopy

What is the treatment?

Thermal ablation, also called “Cold coagulation” is a treatment that can be used for changes affecting the cervix (the neck of the womb). Despite its name, cold coagulation uses heat to treat the outer surface of the cervix ¹.

The procedure can be used to help women who have delicate cells on their cervix which bleed easily when touched. This is a common condition called a cervical ectropion or cervicitis ².

The procedure can also be an effective treatment for selected patients with abnormal or pre-cancerous cells affecting the cervix ^{3,4} (called CIN). It is only suitable for some patients with CIN ⁴. The doctor caring for you will help decide if it is the right treatment for your particular condition and will fully involve you in the decision making process.

What are the benefits?

Thermal ablation applies heat to the cervix and helps to reduce the risk of developing pre-cancer or cancer in the future. It is also used to treat ectropion cells and help with symptoms.

What are the risks?

- Serious complications are very rare ⁵.
- There is a small risk of infection ^{5,7}.
- Watery or blood-stained discharge can be common for a few weeks after treatment (usually up to 4 weeks) ^{2,5,7}.
- Stenosis (narrowing) of the entrance of the cervix can occur in less than 2 in every 100 women ⁵.

What are the risks of not having the treatment?

If a cervical ectropion is not treated, you may continue to experience spotting or excessive discharge. However, an ectropion is not serious and can resolve on its own over time ².

If pre-cancerous / abnormal cells (CIN) are not treated, there is a chance that they may persist and sometimes can progress into cervical cancer over time. If you decide against treatment, your colposcopist will recommend close follow up in clinic to make sure the cell changes are not getting worse ³.

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Are there any alternatives to this treatment?

Another commonly used treatment for abnormal cells (CIN) is called a loop excision or “LLETZ”. There is a separate information leaflet for this procedure, which we can provide for you.

Cervical ectropion can be easily treated with silver nitrate cautery, freezing (cryotherapy) or electricity (diathermy ablation). Local anaesthetic is usually only needed for diathermy treatment ².

Preparing for the treatment

Please note that this treatment cannot be offered whilst you are having a period. Please contact the clinic for advice if you are not sure about what to do. A pregnancy test will usually be performed if you are under the age of 50 and are still having periods.

You will be offered a local anaesthetic to make the procedure more comfortable. You can carry on as normal before the procedure. It is important that you eat and drink before the procedure and do not starve yourself. You may like to bring someone with you to take you home after the procedure, but it is not essential.

During the treatment

We want to involve you in all the decisions about your care and treatment. You will be asked to give written consent to the procedure. This states that you agree to have the treatment and you understand what it involves.

You will have a consultation with a colposcopist and then be asked to undress from the waist down (however loose skirts need not be removed). A nurse will also be looking after you and will help the colposcopist to get into a comfortable position on the examination couch.

The consultation and procedure usually takes between 15-20 minutes. During the examination an instrument called a speculum is inserted into the vagina to hold back the vaginal walls, so the clinician is able to see your cervix. The colposcopist then uses the colposcope to examine your cervix. They may then apply some liquid to the cervix to show any abnormal looking areas.

Local anaesthetic is usually used to ‘numb’ the cervix and make the procedure more comfortable. You may feel a sharp scratch or stinging sensation when the local anaesthetic is being injected. The anaesthetic is the same as that used at the Dentist, and usually works quickly. Once it has taken effect the colposcopist will proceed with treatment.

A heated probe is then gently placed on the surface of the cervix for approximately 45-60 seconds ⁶. This can be repeated if needed, and the probe may be gently re-positioned to ensure all affected areas of the cervix are treated ¹.

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After the treatment

Following the procedure, we advise that you go home and rest for the remainder of the day. You may experience some crampy, period-like pain ^{2,7}. You should be able to go to work the following day, but if your appointment is in the afternoon you may wish to book the following day off work.

You do not need to stay in bed the following day. We recommend that you avoid swimming until any vaginal discharge has stopped, and ideally for at least 4 weeks. If you use the gym, please refrain from going for at least 2 weeks following the procedure, after which you can slowly build up activity again.

When your next menstrual period starts, please only use sanitary towels. Do not use tampons or have sexual intercourse for at least 4 weeks following your treatment ^{2,7}. This allows time for the cervix to heal and reduces the risk of infection. You can wash as normal following your treatment, but we would advise that you shower rather than take baths if possible.

Symptoms to report

- i) **High temperature (over 37.8c), heavy vaginal bleeding, or strong-smelling discharge**
Infections can happen after treatment but are usually very treatable with antibiotics. If you have any of the above symptoms, please contact your family doctor or the colposcopy clinic for advice. You may need an examination and/or antibiotics ^{2,5,7}.
- ii) **Pain**
You should take your normal painkillers to ease any discomfort but do not take more than the recommended dose. If you have severe pain that is not settling, please contact your family doctor or the colposcopy clinic for advice. Out of hours, you may attend via the Emergency Department if your symptoms are worrying.

Follow-up

If you have had Thermal ablation to treat abnormal cells (CIN), it is very important that you have a smear test six months after treatment. This can be done at your GP practice.

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Contact details

If you would like any further advice or information, please contact the Colposcopy clinic on:

0121 505 4246 (City Hospital)

0121 507 3249 (Sandwell Hospital)

Monday to Friday: 9am – 5pm

Further information

We have listed some useful websites which provide further information and sources of support. Some of the websites are run by cancer charities, but this does not mean that you have cancer.

Macmillan

Treatment for abnormal cervical cells

www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/treatments-and-drugs/abnormal-cervical-cells

Jo’s Cervical cancer Trust

Cervical ectropion (cervical erosion)

www.jostrust.org.uk/information/cervix/cervical-ectropion

Other treatments for cervical cell changes

www.jostrust.org.uk/information/cervical-cancer/treatments/other-treatments-for-cervical-cell-changes

The British Society for Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology

Information for women

www.bsccp.org.uk/women/information-for-women

(Websites checked 22 August 2023)

Sources used for the information in this leaflet

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3. NHS England (2023). Cervical screening: programme and colposcopy management. Guidelines for commissioners, screening providers and programme managers for NHS cervical screening. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cervical-screening-programme-and-colposcopy-management> (Accessed: 22 August 2023).
4. Parry-Smith, W., Underwood, M., De Bellis-Ayres, S., Bangs, L., Redman, C. W., & Panikkar, J. (2015). Success rate of cold coagulation for the treatment of cervical intraepithelial neoplasia: a retrospective analysis of a series of cases. *Journal of lower genital tract disease*, 19(1), 17–21. <https://doi.org/10.1097/LGT.0000000000000031>
5. Macmillan (2021). Treatment for abnormal cervical cells. Available at: www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/treatments-and-drugs/abnormal-cervical-cells (Accessed 22 August 2023)
6. Boles, T., Salcedo, M. P., et al. (2022). Overview of thermal ablation devices for treating precancerous cervical lesions in low-resource settings. *Journal of global health*, 12.
7. British Society for Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology (BSCCP) (No date). Information For Women. Available at: <https://www.bsccp.org.uk/women/information-for-women> (Accessed: 22 August 2023).

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