Joint RCOG/BSCCP Colposcopy Guidance During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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1. Introduction

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused a cessation of the cervical screening programme in England from 8 April to 8 June 2020. The screening programme was also stopped in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland.

Following recommencement of the cervical screening programme, reminders were sent to patients offering cervical screening.

Many colposcopy units were curtailed in the number of appointments they could offer during the first wave of the pandemic, and following restarting of the screening programme colposcopy units had to manage a large backlog, which has taken a number of months to return to provision of a near normal service.

Many units are still not able to offer the same number of appointments as pre-COVID levels, due to local guidance on social distancing, increased cleaning etc.

Although the incidence of COVID is now decreasing again, many areas still have significant disease in their communities. Screening programmes have reviewed this and in England, they have issued a statement – a copy of which is provided below encouraging units to continue with colposcopy provision while it is safe to do so.

There will also be guidance for Wales/Scotland/Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland, please contact your local and national screening leads for detailed guidance on service provision in your local area.

Guidance issued by Director of Public Health England December 2020:

Letter sent on behalf of Deborah Tomalin, Director of Public Health Commissioning and Operations to Colposcopy Units

Given the increase in the number of COVID-19 patients being hospitalised, we are reissuing the statement about the maintenance of screening and immunisation services shared in the Autumn. I have asked the team to review all the technical guidance to ensure that messages are consistent.

Providers are urged to prioritise maintenance of services, as long as it is safe to do so:

NHSEI advises where there are local Covid-related lockdowns or other restrictions in place, the expectation is that screening and immunisation services should continue as contracted, including continuing actions to support the restoration of NHS screening services and the proactive offer of immunisations to those who missed vaccination in line with the NHSEI Phase 3 letter. This includes the expectation that screening and immunisation staff should not be diverted towards other services, or their buildings or facilities repurposed for other uses, without the specific agreement of the relevant regional public health commissioner.

Any indication of service change due to local or national lockdowns should be raised by the provider to NHSEI regional commissioners so that it can be considered and mitigations put in place that minimise any disruption to delivery of the screening and immunisation programmes.
Most screening programmes recommend continued provision of screening, while it is safe to do so. This will be dependent on local policies and colposcopy units being able to provide a safe service to their patients, while ensuring safety of staff in the provision of Colposcopy services.

Each colposcopy service should review their national guidance for provision of services and also Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) requirements in line with local and national guidance.

2. Colposcopy practice

Evidence suggests that the presence of COVID-19 is low in the lower genital tract, however there has been reports of live virus particles isolated in faeces\textsuperscript{1,6}. The overall risk of infection from these particles is however thought to be low.

2.1 Genital secretions and urine

Initial evidence suggested the virus was not identifiable in the genital tract or urine of female patients\textsuperscript{1–3} however more recently the virus has been identified on vaginal PCR swabs in COVID-19 positive patients\textsuperscript{4} as well as urine samples.\textsuperscript{5} Overall the risk of SARS-CoV-2 dissemination from these body fluids appears to be minimal.

2.2 Faeces

SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA has been found in faeces in 29–67\% of COVID-19 cases\textsuperscript{1,2} However, infectious live SARS-CoV-2 viral particles have been detected in faeces in a much smaller proportion of cases, estimated to be of the order of 1–2\%.\textsuperscript{2} Thus, while it appears that SARS-CoV-2 can be transmitted by the faecal route, the low prevalence of live viral particles within faeces suggests the potential transmission risk during colposcopy practice is low.

2.3 Treatments during COVID-19 Pandemic

The risks of infection posed by COVID 19 particles found in lower genital tract and faeces material is thought to be low, thus we recommend Colposcopic treatment should continue as per national guidance.

It is unlikely that smoke produced during a LLETZ procedure will contain COVID-19 virus particles

We recommend that laser ablation and excision should not be used however due to vaporisation. Cold (thermal) coagulation can be performed but not as see and treat therapeutic option.

Serviced vacuum suction should be used as per guidance below.

3. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Given the likely prevalence of asymptomatic carriers of SAR-CoV-2, all staff should wear appropriate PPE during consultations. Please also check local and national guidance.

In asymptomatic women:
• Gloves, apron and an appropriate mask be worn for colposcopy face-to-face consultation and examination. The minimum number of staff should be present during procedures.

• A serviced smoke extractor must be used for any LLETZ procedures.

• Minimise use of coagulation procedures with diathermy, as this causes greater dispersal of vaporised particles.

In women with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 infection (including those who attend with symptoms which may be indicative): defer colposcopy assessment until symptoms resolve or the woman has tested negative.

In women who are self-isolating due to household members testing positive, or having been contacted by Test and Trace, their appointments could be deferred until they have completed their self-isolation period (this should be evaluated on a case by case basis).

It is worth considering telephoning women prior to their appointment to assess if they are self-isolating due to either there being suspected infection in the household (including themselves), being in a vulnerable group, or if they have symptoms of COVID-19.

Consideration should be given to not ask women to cough during biopsy other procedures, if that is your usual practice to facilitate bringing the cervix into view.

If women have significant symptoms suggestive of cervical cancer and are symptomatic of COVID-19, then the whole colposcopy multi-disciplinary team should wear full personal protective equipment (PPE) during consultation and examination.

4. Vacuum suction for treatments

Most units should have an appropriately serviced laser vacuum suction device for treatments. Units should check their treatment filtration system including whether it has been appropriately serviced.

The vacuum extraction facility for colposcopy is a high efficiency filtration system in achieving successful plume removal.

This may provide reassurance of usage of this vacuum extractor system. Appropriate PPE should be used even with usage of a serviced vacuum extraction system.

Filtration is achieved in three stages – by air passing through a pre-filter and a two stage, high efficiency filter combining ULPA grade media and activated carbon.

The product advice suggests the combined effectiveness of the total filtration package provides an efficiency of greater than 99.9999995% at 0.01 micron. Coronavirus particles measure from 0.08–0.14um.
References


The links below are to the relevant sites for Scotland/ Northern Ireland/ Wales and Republic of Ireland – please contact your local cervical screening leads, for more detailed information

Guidance on Cervical Screening - Northern Ireland
Available at: https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/directorate-public-health/service-development-and-screening/cervical-cancer-screening

Guidance for Cervical Screening During pandemic – Republic of Ireland –
Available at: https://www2.hse.ie/screening-and-vaccinations/cervical-screening/cervical-screening-coronavirus.html

Public Health Scotland – Cervical Screening
Available at: http://www.healthscotland.scot/health-topics/screening/cervical-screening

Cervical Screening Wales: Screening During the Coronavirus Pandemic