**Frequently asked questions relating to cervical screening:**

**In Scotland, what changes were made to the cervical screening programme in March 2020?**

Two main changes were made to the cervical screening programme on 30 March 2020, following a recommendation from the UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC):

• Human papillomavirus (HPV) testing replaced cervical cytology as the primary (first) cervical screening test. Cytology based tests are still used but only when high-risk HPV is found.

• The routine screening interval for those aged 25–49 years changed from three to five years. The routine interval for those aged 50–64 years remained unchanged at five years.

**Why is Scotland different from the other UK nations?**

Scotland was the first UK nation to act on the UK NSC’s recommendation to extend routine screening intervals, at the same time as HPV testing was introduced in March 2020. This is the direction of travel for all UK nations, the rest of Europe and beyond. In the UK, Wales introduced HPV testing in September 2018, followed by a move to five yearly intervals in January 2022. Although England fully implemented HPV testing at the end of 2020, they haven’t yet moved to five yearly intervals. Northern Ireland is yet to implement HPV testing.

**Why did HPV testing replace cervical cytology as the primary (first) test?**

Testing for HPV, the main cause of cervical cancer, is a more effective and sensitive test than cervical cytology (looking at cells under a microscope). It’s better at identifying those at risk of cervical cancer and will help ensure any changes are found and treated earlier. Studies suggest it provides 60–70% greater protection against invasive cervical cancer when compared to cervical cytology as a primary screening test.

**What is the link between HPV and cervical screening?**

High-risk types of HPV can sometimes cause cell changes that can lead to cervical cancer, if left untreated. Over 99% of cervical cancers are caused by HPV, which is why we now test for it during the cervical screening test.

**How common is HPV?**

HPV is a very common virus, passed on through sexual contact. This includes any type of sexual contact, not just penetrative sex. Four out of five people in Scotland will have it at some point in their lives. It’s usually cleared by the body in time, but about 1 in 10 infections are harder to get rid of.

**Why were routine screening intervals changed for those aged 25–49 years?**

Evidence shows those who don’t have HPV have a very low risk of developing cervical cancer within five years. It takes around 10 to 15 years for cervical cancer to develop after an HPV infection, which means that regular screening will pick up cell changes before they develop into cervical cancer. For this reason, the UK NSC 3 recommended that it’s safe for routine screening to be offered every five years now, regardless of their age. This recommendation was based on balancing the benefits and harms of screening, as well as the fact that screening every five years with the HPV test has been shown to prevent more cases of cervical cancer than screening every three years using cytology.

**Will five yearly routine intervals be applied to people who haven’t yet been tested for HPV?**

People on routine screening who had their last cervical screening test prior to March 2020 won’t have had their sample tested for HPV. They’ll therefore be invited for their next screening test three years after their last one. If they take up their invitation and no HPV is found in their sample, they’ll then move to five-year intervals. If they don’t 4 take up their invitation (default), they’ll automatically move to five-year intervals as they were offered an HPV test three years after their last invitation.

**Should people who have been immunised against HPV still attend their cervical screening appointment?**

The vaccine doesn’t protect against all types of HPV and won’t protect against any HPV infections picked up before the vaccine. So, although the vaccine offers good protection, it’s still important to encourage people to attend their cervical screening test when invited. It’s the combination of the HPV vaccine and HPV testing that could eventually eliminate cervical cancer in Scotland.