

A new genetic test for anal cancer

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Anal cancer is mostly caused by human papillomavirus (HPV) - the same virus that causes cervical cancer. Diagnosis presents many challenges. Full biopsies are painful, and taking a small sample of cells ('cytology') is problematic because lesions can be hidden and clinicians give varying interpretations of results.

High-resolution anoscopy, where the anal canal is examined with a high resolution magnifying instrument, is often used as the primary screening tool for high-risk populations but is uncomfortable for the patient, expensive, complex and generates subjective results.

Once developed, the test would involve taking a small sample of cells from the anal canal via a swab and then sending the sample off to a laboratory for epigenetic analysis.

While a test could be developed within five years, the researchers caution that the results first need to be confirmed in a much larger study across the UK, and repeated using swab samples rather than the biopsies which were used in the current study.