

# Cervical screening

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### What is cervical screening?

Cervical screening is a free health test available on the NHS as part of the national cervical screening program. It helps prevent cervical cancer. A nurse uses a speculum and a small brush to take a sample of cells from the cervix that are sent to a laboratory and tested. It usually only takes a few minutes.



### Who is eligible for cervical screening?

Anyone registered as female with a GP between the ages of 25-64. Invitations are sent every three years between the ages of 25-49, and then every five years until the age of 64. You may get your first invitation up to 6 months before you turn 25.

### How do I book a test?

As long as you are registered as female with a GP then you will be invited automatically when you are eligible. This may be by letter or text message. You do not need to wait for an invitation if you missed your last cervical screening. If you think you may be eligible for screening but have not been invited, speak with your GP.

### Where do I go for cervical screening?

Cervical screening usually takes place at the GP. You can book an appointment online, over the phone or on the NHS app. Some sexual health clinics and walk-in services also offer cervical screening. There are also specialist services available for trans and non-binary people to have their cervical screening. It is up to you where you have your cervical screening.

### What are the symptoms of cervical cancer?

In most cases, unexplained vaginal bleeding is the first symptom of cervical cancer. This may occur between monthly periods, during or after sex, or after the menopause. Other symptoms of cervical

cancer are pain and discomfort during sex, a change in vaginal discharge and pelvic pain.

Remember, these symptoms are very common and can be caused by many different conditions. Having any of them does not mean you have cervical cancer- but they should be checked out.

If you have symptoms, contact your GP surgery. Cervical screening is not usually the right test for people who have symptoms.

### I don't have any symptoms. Do I still need to take part?

Cervical screening prevents cancer before it starts. That's why it is important to attend your screening, even if nothing is wrong.

Cervical cancer is caused by high-risk strains of a common virus called the Human Papillomavirus (HPV). This virus spreads very easily through sexual contact, and it has no symptoms, so people won't know they have it. Pre-cancerous cells and early cervical cancer often do not have any symptoms either. Cell changes are easily prevented if caught early, before they get a chance to turn into cancer. It takes a very long time for cell changes to develop into cancer - usually between 5 and 20 years.

### Does cervical screening hurt?

Everyone's experience of cervical screening is different. For most people the procedure is painless but for some it can feel uncomfortable. Some people experience discomfort when the speculum is inserted. Some people experience a mild cramp-like sensation while the sample is being taken- which

usually lasts for just a few seconds. The whole procedure lasts just a few minutes.

There are some physical and psychological reasons why cervical screening can be more painful for some people. If you think this might be you, book an appointment to discuss this with your GP or nurse. It is important to remember that you are in control and can ask for the procedure to stop if it gets too much.

### **If I test positive for HPV, does it mean that my partner has cheated?**

No, this does not mean your partner has been unfaithful. It is hard to know who you got HPV from, or when. This is because HPV can be 'dormant' or 'clinically insignificant'. This means it can be in your body for a long time without causing any problems or being picked up by a test. It might become active later and then found with a test, even if you've been with a partner for many years.

### **If my cervical screening results show cell changes, does it mean I have cervical cancer?**

No, cell changes are not cervical cancer. We know that about 1 in 20 people get a cervical screening result of cell changes. Cell changes happen when our cells start behaving in a way they should not, but many go back to normal without treatment. Sometimes treatment is needed to make sure cell changes don't develop into cervical cancer.

It is very rare for cervical cancer to be diagnosed from cervical screening. Only about 1 in 2,000 (less than 1%) people with an abnormal cervical screening result will have cervical cancer.

### **What reasonable adjustments can I ask for?**

You can ask for a longer appointment, bring a friend or support worker to the appointment, or ask for an appointment just to discuss the screening procedure and what happens. During the screening, some people feel more comfortable inserting the speculum themselves.

### **I feel scared of cervical screening and put it off. What should I do?**

Firstly, know that this is not uncommon. If it is your first cervical screening, you feel embarrassed or worried, you have had a bad experience before, or you have experienced anything that makes the test hard for you, telling the person doing the test means they can try to give you the right support. Nurses are experts. If you don't feel comfortable saying something, try writing it down.

### **I have been sexually assaulted in the past. What should I do?**

If you have experienced sexual trauma, you may find disclosing this experience very difficult or you may have never disclosed. You may also deny it when asked. All of these feelings and reactions are normal. There is absolutely no pressure to disclose anything at the appointment. But, if you feel comfortable to, it might be helpful to let the nurse know. If they are aware, they may better understand how to help you through the appointment.

---

## **I need more information or someone to talk to. What should I do?**

### **Eve Appeal**


 [eveappeal.org.uk](http://eveappeal.org.uk)

**Eve Appeal General Enquiries:**  [office@eveappeal.org.uk](mailto:office@eveappeal.org.uk) or  020 7605 0100

**Cervical screening: leaflet for women considering screening - available in different languages**

 [www.gov.uk/government/publications/cervical-screening-description-in-brief](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cervical-screening-description-in-brief)

### **NHS Cervical screening**

 [www.nhs.uk/conditions/cervical-screening](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/cervical-screening)