

Cervical screening (smear test)



About this information

This information is for anyone who has been invited for cervical screening (a smear test) or is interested in learning about it. It explains:

- what cervical screening is
- who is invited for cervical screening
- what happens during a cervical screening appointment
- cervical screening results.

What is cervical screening?

Cervical screening is a free health test available on the NHS as part of the National Cervical Screening Programme. It helps prevent cervical cancer by checking for a virus called high-risk HPV and cervical cell changes. It is not a test for cancer.

It is your choice whether to go for cervical screening. We hope this information helps you make the best decision for you and your health.

If you have symptoms, see your GP for an examination. Cervical screening is not for people who have symptoms.

Read about symptoms at jostrust.org.uk/symptoms

“I was a year overdue my smear test – life gets in the way and you end up putting your health to one side. But my friend encouraged me to go and we both went together.”

Marianne

Who is invited for cervical screening?

You should be invited for cervical screening if you have a cervix. Women are usually born with a cervix, and trans men, non-binary and intersex people may also have one.

In the UK, you are automatically invited for cervical screening if you are:

- between the ages of 25 to 64
- registered as female with a GP surgery.

You may get your first invite up to 6 months before you turn 25. You can book an appointment as soon as you get the invite.

How often will I be invited for cervical screening?

Your cervical screening result will help decide when you are next invited for cervical screening.

You may be invited:

- every year
- every 3 years
- every 5 years
- to colposcopy for more tests.

Booking your cervical screening appointment

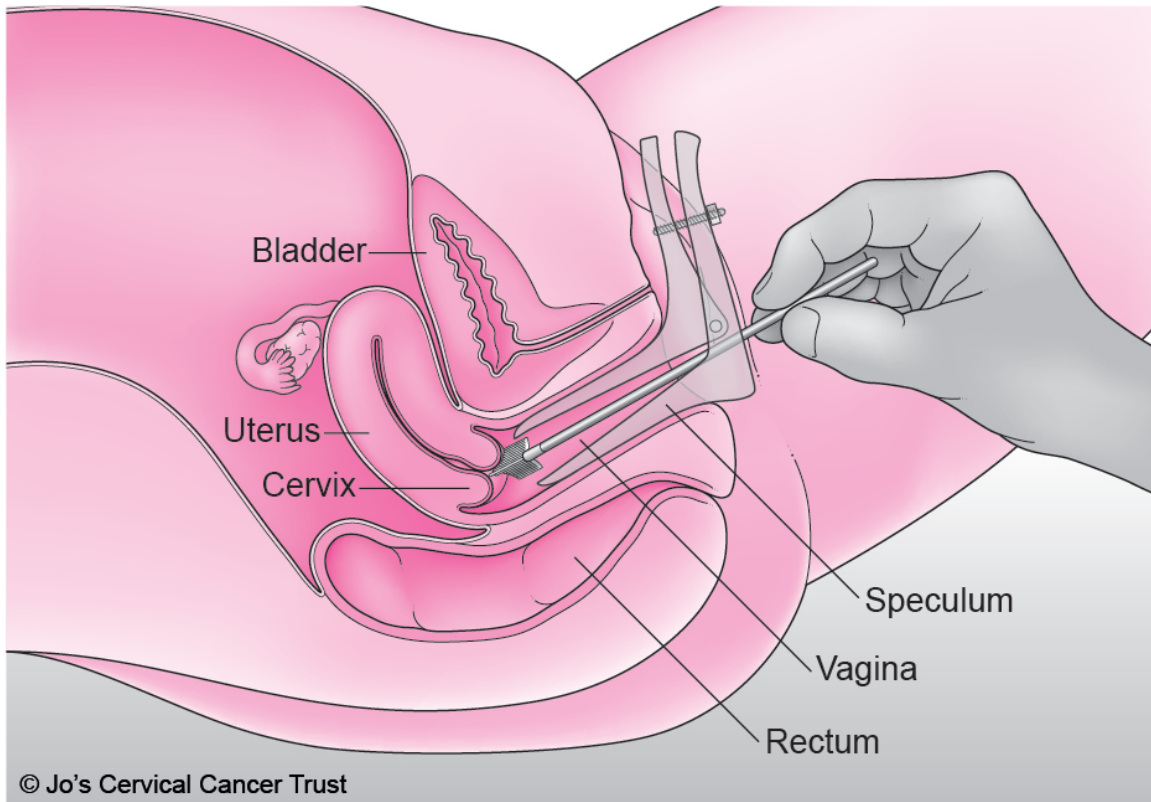
If you are registered with a GP, you will get a letter telling you it is time for your cervical screening appointment. You have to contact your GP to book an appointment. You can usually do this online, in person, or over the phone.

If you don't want to go to the GP, sexual health or private clinics in your local area may offer cervical screening.

You can book a cervical screening appointment at any time. If you can, it is best not to book a cervical screening when you have your period because it can make it harder to get a result. But the most important thing is booking an appointment for a date and time that works for you.

Try not to use spermicide or oil-based lubricant (lube) for 24 hours before the test, as they can affect the results.

Someone having cervical screening



At your cervical screening appointment

A nurse, sometimes called a sample taker, will invite you into a treatment room. They will explain what cervical screening is and check if you have any questions.

The nurse will give you a private space to undress from the waist down. If you are wearing a dress or skirt, you can leave this on and just take off your underwear.

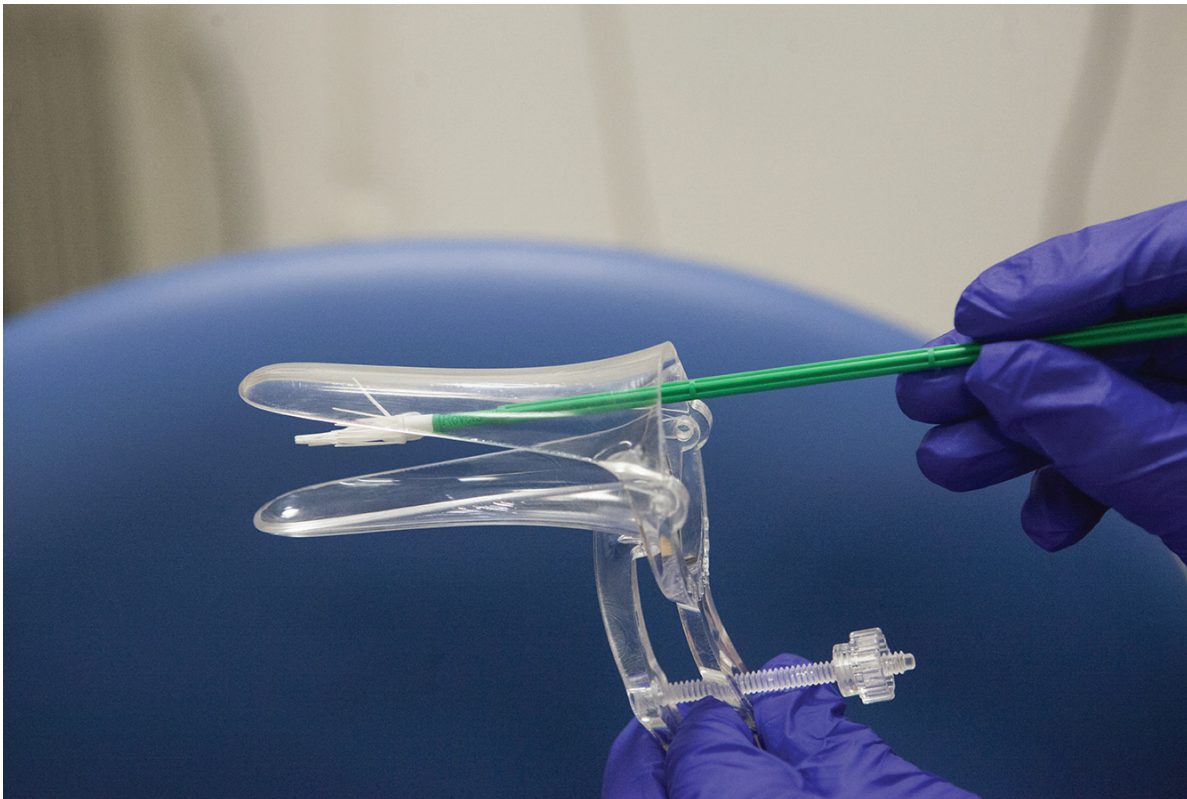
The nurse will ask you to lie on an examination bed. You can lie:

- on your back with your legs bent up, your ankles together and your knees apart
- on your left side with your knees bent.

The nurse will give you a new, clean paper sheet to cover the lower half of your body. They will let you know when the test is about to start.

First, they gently put a new, clean speculum into your vagina. A speculum is usually a plastic cylinder with a round end – sometimes a metal speculum is used. The speculum is sometimes the part that people find uncomfortable. The nurse may use a small amount of water-based lubricant to help make it more comfortable for you.

A speculum and brush



Once the speculum is inside your vagina, the nurse will gently open it so they can see your cervix.

Then the nurse will use a small, soft brush to quickly take a sample of cells from your cervix. This may feel a bit strange, but should not be painful.

The nurse will put your sample of cells into a small plastic container (vial) of liquid. The liquid preserves the cells so they can be sent to a lab for testing.

And that's it! The nurse will take the speculum out of your vagina and give you a private space to dress again. They will explain how and when you should get your results.

Our cervical screening tips

There are lots of reasons why cervical screening may be hard for you. The tips here are for everyone, although you may feel some are not right for you. It may take a while to try a few things before finding something that works for you.

Talk to your nurse or doctor

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. If you don't feel comfortable saying something, try writing it down.

“I was scared about the pain, but the nurse didn't rush me at all. I was able to take my time. I'd like to share that with anyone who's feeling the way I did.”

Claire

Ask for the first appointment of the day

If you feel uncomfortable in waiting rooms, you may want to ask to book the first appointment of the day. This can mean it is quieter and there is less time for you to wait.

Ask to book a longer or double appointment

Having more time before, during or after cervical screening can help people take in information about the test and process everything that happens. If this would be useful for you, you may want to check if your GP surgery can offer you a longer appointment.

The receptionist may ask why you need a longer appointment – remember, you do not have to disclose anything.

Ask for a nurse or doctor of a particular gender

You may feel more comfortable knowing that a female or male nurse will be doing your cervical screening. If you have a nurse or doctor you trust, you may want to check with your GP surgery if they are able to do it.

Take someone you trust with you

It could be a friend, family member, partner or someone else. They can be in the waiting room or examination room with you to offer support. They may also be able to speak on your behalf about any worries.

Wear a skirt or dress

If you feel comfortable wearing a skirt or dress, it may help you feel more covered. You can keep it on during the test and only take off your underwear.

You do get a paper sheet to cover yourself. If you would like to, you can also ask if you can bring a spare shawl or blanket too.

Ask for a smaller speculum

Speculums come in different sizes. If you find the standard size too uncomfortable, you can ask to try another size.

Put the speculum in yourself

You may feel more relaxed and comfortable about putting the speculum in your vagina yourself. If you have a partner with you, you may prefer them to put the speculum in.

Lie in a different position

Lying on your back may feel uncomfortable for lots of reasons. You can ask to lie on your left hand side with your knees bent (left lateral position).

Use post-menopausal prescriptions

If you have gone through or are going through the menopause, let your doctor or nurse know. After menopause, the opening of the vagina and vaginal walls become less able to stretch, which can make the test more uncomfortable. You can ask your nurse to give (prescribe) you a vaginal oestrogen cream or pessary, which may help.

Ask to be referred to colposcopy

Sometimes the nurse may not be able to see your cervix. This could be because you have a tilted cervix, cervical stenosis (where the vagina narrows) or something else. It does not mean there is anything to worry about. The nurse may suggest you go to a colposcopy department for cervical screening, as they have equipment like adjustable beds that can help when trying to see the cervix.

Visit a specialist cervical screening clinic

Some people prefer to go for cervical screening in a clinic that meets their needs.

If you have experienced sexual violence, the charity My Body Back has clinics in London and Glasgow. The London clinic is for people living anywhere in the UK, and the Glasgow clinic is for people living in Scotland.

If you are a trans man and/or non-binary person with a cervix, you may experience dysphoria around cervical screening, as well as other feelings that make the test difficult.

If you want to go for cervical screening but want a specialist clinic, there are a number in the UK, including:

- **56T in London**
- **Clinic T in Brighton**
- **cliniQ in London**
- **My Body Back in London and Glasgow**

How is the sample tested?

HPV primary screening is the usual way of testing the sample of cells taken at your cervical screening appointment. It tests for a virus called high-risk human papillomavirus (HPV) that can cause cervical cell changes that may develop into cervical cancer. HPV primary screening is used in England, Scotland and Wales.

In the future, HPV primary screening will be used in Northern Ireland but the start date is to be confirmed. Northern Ireland currently use a test called cytology, which is when the sample is looked at for cell changes.

Why are the benefits and risks of cervical screening screening?

You are invited for cervical screening because evidence shows that the benefits of the test outweigh any risks.

Along with the HPV vaccine, cervical screening is the best way to protect against cervical cancer – and prevents over 7 in 10 diagnoses. However, like any screening test, cervical screening is not perfect and there are some risks.

Benefits of cervical screening

- Cervical screening aims to identify whether you are at higher risk of developing cervical cell changes or cervical cancer. This means you can get any care or treatment you need early.
- England, Scotland and Wales now use HPV primary screening, which is even better as it is based on your individual risk. This means how frequently you are invited for cervical screening is based on your last result and within a timeframe that is safe for you.

Read more about HPV primary screening at jostrust.org.uk/smear-test

Possible risks of cervical screening

- In a few cases, cervical screening will give an incorrect result. Using HPV primary screening makes this less likely, as it is a more accurate test – it is better at detecting cell changes overall, as well as detecting them earlier.
- Sometimes cell changes go back to normal without needing treatment. At the moment, we can't tell which cell changes will go back to normal, so treating means we can be sure we are preventing them from developing into cervical cancer. This means some people may have unnecessary treatment, which is called overdiagnosis or overtreatment. Using HPV primary screening should help prevent this, as your results are more tailored to your individual risk.

It is hard to know exactly how many people are affected by these risks. But we do know, for those aged 25 to 64, the benefits of cervical screening outweigh the risks and most results will be clear.

Your cervical screening results

You should get your cervical screening results within 2 weeks after your test. You should always get your results letter in the post. If you don't get a letter within the timeframe your GP surgery gave you, you may want to ring them.

Most people will not have cervical cell changes, but we know that waiting for your cervical screening results may make you feel anxious, so we are here if you need some support. You can call our free Helpline on **0808 802 8000** – check the opening hours at [jostrust.org.uk/helpline](https://www.jostrust.org.uk/helpline)

Depending on your result and where you live, you may be asked to:

- come back for cervical screening in 1 year
- come back for cervical screening in 3 years
- come back for cervical screening in 5 years
- have some more tests at colposcopy.

What do my results mean?

No HPV found

What it means: You don't have high-risk HPV.

Next steps: If you live in England or Wales, you will be invited for cervical screening in:

- 3 years if you are age 25 to 49
- 5 years if you are age 50 to 64.

If you live in Scotland, you will be invited for cervical screening in 5 years, whatever your age. We know this may worry you, but it is safe and based on a recommendation from the National Screening Committee. It is likely that, in the future, all UK countries will invite everyone who does not have HPV for cervical screening every 5 years.

HPV found – no cell changes found

What it means: You have high-risk HPV, but you do not have changes to your cervical cells.

Next steps: You will be invited for cervical screening in 1 year, to check the HPV is gone.

HPV found – cell changes found

What it means: You have high-risk HPV and cervical cell changes.

Next steps: You will be invited to colposcopy for further tests.

Inadequate

What it means: You sometimes get this result if the sample could not be tested properly, does not have enough cells or if the cells cannot be seen properly under a microscope.

Next steps: Repeat cervical screening after 3 months.

If you live in Northern Ireland

If you live in Northern Ireland, your sample will be tested using cytology. Your results will show whether you do not cell changes or you do. If you do, you will be told whether they are borderline, low grade or high grade cell changes:

- If you have borderline or low grade cell changes, your sample will be tested for high-risk HPV. You will only be invited to colposcopy if you also have high-risk HPV. This is called HPV triage.
- If you have high grade cell changes, you will be invited to colposcopy.

If you are invited to colposcopy

Colposcopy is an examination to take a closer look at your cervix. It is usually done at a hospital. An expert, called a colposcopist, does the examination. This is a different expert to the one at your cervical screening.

We have more information about colposcopy at jostrust.org.uk/colposcopy

More information and support

A lot of people are worried or unsure about cervical screening, but we are here to support you and give you any information you need. On our website, we have specific information for:

- under 25s
- over 64s
- people with a learning disability
- survivors of sexual violence.

If you have questions, you can call our Helpline on **0808 802 8000** – check the opening hours at jostrust.org.uk/helpline

If you want to talk with others going through a similar experience, you may want to join our Forum at jostrust.org.uk/forum

We have an Ask the Expert service for general medical queries – visit jostrust.org.uk/ask-expert

Can you help Jo's reach more people?

We rely on your generous donations to help us provide free support and information to the people who need it. If you find this information helpful, please consider making a donation at jostrust.org.uk/donate

Thanks and references

Thank you to everyone shared their experiences to help us develop this information. All of our information is reviewed by experts for clinical accuracy – thanks to those who reviewed this. For references, email info@jostrust.org.uk

Version 3.0. Updated March 2020. Next planned review 2021. This information was correct at the time of publication.

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