

Information about
Cervical screening

Cervical screening (smear test)

Jo's cervical
cancer trust



jostrust.org.uk

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 can have cervical screening
 - what happens during your appointment
 - cervical screening results.
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What is cervical screening?

Cervical screening is a test that helps prevent cervical cancer. It is sometimes called a smear test.

Cervical screening is not a test for cancer. It looks for cell changes (abnormal cells) on your cervix caused by human papillomavirus (HPV).

We hope this information helps you understand more about what will happen during and after cervical screening. If you have any questions or worries, see page 10 for more ways we can help.

“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 can have cervical screening?

You are automatically invited for cervical screening if you:

- are registered as female with a GP surgery
- are aged between 25 and 64.

You have screening every:

- 3 years between the ages of 25 and 49
- 5 years between the age of 50 and 64.

Make sure your GP surgery has your current address because this is where your invitation letter is sent.

On our website, we have more information for:

- people under 25
- people over 64
- people with learning disabilities
- people who have experienced sexual violence.

If you think this information might be helpful for you, visit [jostrust.org.uk/smeartest](https://www.jostrust.org.uk/smeartest)

If you have symptoms

If you have symptoms or are worried about anything, see your doctor – don't wait for your cervical screening appointment.

Symptoms are often caused by things other than cervical cancer, but it is important to get them checked. For more information, visit [jostrust.org.uk/symptoms](https://www.jostrust.org.uk/symptoms)

What happens at my appointment?

Before your appointment

You have your cervical screening appointment at the GP surgery. You have to book one yourself.

The whole appointment is usually about 15 minutes, but the test itself only takes a few minutes.

When booking your appointment, there are some things to think about:

- A female nurse usually does the test. If there is a nurse or doctor you would prefer, you can ask if they are able to do the test.
- If you get regular periods, don't book an appointment when you are bleeding. If possible, the best time to go for cervical screening is halfway between one period and the next (the middle of your menstrual cycle).
- Do not use spermicide, lubricant jelly (lube) or barrier methods of contraception for 24 hours before the test, as they can affect the results.

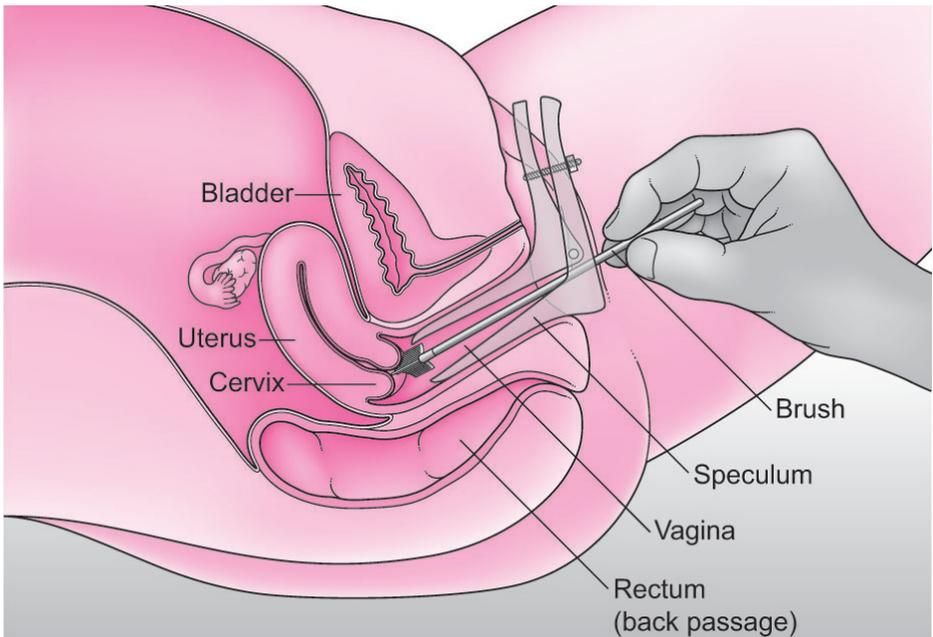
During your appointment

1. At the start of the appointment, your nurse should explain what will happen during the test and answer any questions you have.
2. Your nurse will give you a private space to undress from the waist down.
3. You lie on an examination bed with a paper sheet covering your lower half.
4. Your nurse will usually ask you to bend your knees and put your ankles together. Some beds have stirrups that you put your feet in.
5. Your nurse will gently put a clean speculum into your vagina. A speculum is a plastic cylinder with a round end (see page 5). It gradually opens your vagina so your nurse can see your cervix.
6. Your nurse uses a small, soft brush to take a sample of cells from the cervix.
7. Your sample of cells is placed in a small plastic container (vial) of liquid to preserve them, so it can be sent to a laboratory for testing (see page 7).
8. That's it! The test is over. Once the speculum is taken out, your nurse will give you a private space to dress.

A speculum and brush



Someone having cervical screening



Helpful tips for your appointment

There are lots of reasons why cervical screening may be hard for you. Here are some tips that may make it better:

- Ask for a nurse or doctor that you know and trust.
- Ask to book a double or longer appointment if you may need more time during or after the test.
- Take someone you trust with you to your appointment.
- If you feel anxious, worried or upset about having the test, tell the nurse or doctor so they can try to support you. If you don't feel able to say it, write it down for them.
- Wearing a skirt or dress may help you feel more covered. Or check if you can take a spare shawl or blanket.
- Ask for a different sized speculum if the one they use is too uncomfortable.
- If you are going through or have gone through the menopause, ask your nurse if they can prescribe you vaginal oestrogen pessaries to make the test more comfortable.

The test may be a bit uncomfortable, but it should not be painful. If it hurts, tell your nurse and ask them to stop. Remember, you are in control.

“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

Getting your cervical screening results

When will I get my results?

You should get your results within 2 weeks of your appointment, but it can sometimes take longer.

Most of us have normal results, and about 1 in 20 (5%) people will have an abnormal result. Remember, how long it takes to get your results does not indicate what they are.

How do they work out my results?

The way we test the sample of cells taken during cervical screening is changing:

- In some areas, the cells are looked at for changes (abnormal cells) first – see page 8.
- In some areas, the cells are tested for high-risk human papillomavirus (HPV) first – see page 9.

You will have different results depending on where you live.

To get the most up-to-date information about the changes to cervical screening, visit **[jostrust.org.uk/smeartest](https://www.jostrust.org.uk/smeartest)**

We also have more information about HPV and cell changes at **[jostrust.org.uk/information](https://www.jostrust.org.uk/information)**

What do my results mean?

If you live in area that looks for cell changes (abnormal cells) first:

Normal

No cell changes were found. You will be invited for cervical screening in 3 or 5 years, depending on your age (see page 2).

Abnormal

Changes to cells may be:

- borderline or low-grade changes (dyskaryosis)
- moderate or severe (high-grade) dyskaryosis.

Borderline or low-grade changes are very close to being normal and may go away without treatment. Your letter will tell you whether you:

- can continue going for cervical screening when invited
- are invited to colposcopy, where an expert will take a closer look at your cervix.

If you have moderate or severe (high-grade) dyskaryosis, you will be invited for colposcopy.

Read more about colposcopy at jostrust.org.uk/colposcopy

Inadequate

You may need to have another test after 3 months because the first test couldn't be read properly. This may be because the sample didn't have enough cells, or the cells could not be properly seen.

If you live in an area that looks for high-risk HPV first:

HPV result unavailable or unreliable

This means that a true result could not be given. Usually you have another test after 3 months.

No HPV found (HPV negative)

If you don't have high-risk HPV, your sample won't be tested for cell changes as it is very unlikely you would have or develop them. You will be invited for cervical screening again in 3 or 5 years, depending on your age.

HPV found (HPV positive) but inadequate

You usually need to repeat the test after 3 months because the first one couldn't be read properly. This may be because the sample didn't have enough cells, or the cells could not be properly seen.

HPV found (HPV positive) but no abnormal cells found

Your immune system usually gets rid of HPV. You will be invited for cervical screening again in 1 year, to check that the HPV is gone.

If you have 3 HPV positive results in a row, you will be invited to colposcopy, where an expert takes a closer look at your cervix.

HPV found (HPV positive) and abnormal cells found

Changes to cells may be:

- borderline or low-grade changes (dyskaryosis)
- moderate or severe (high-grade) dyskaryosis.

If you have any grade of cell changes and HPV, you will be referred for colposcopy, where an expert takes a closer look at your cervix.

Understanding your result

Remember that having cell changes does not mean you have cancer. It means your doctors and nurses now know you need some extra monitoring or treatment.

We have more information on our website at jostrust.org.uk/cellchanges

Being told you have cell changes or HPV may be worrying or upsetting, but we are here to support you. Read all the ways we can help below.

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. If you have any questions, you can visit the website at jostrust.org.uk or call our Helpline on **0808 802 8000**.

We also have an Ask the Expert service for any medical questions you have – visit jostrust.org.uk/ask-expert

Can you help Jo's reach more people?

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

Cervical cancer can be prevented. We're doing something about it by providing information and support to everyone who needs it. We have information about:

- HPV
- Cervical screening
- Cell changes (abnormal cells)
- Cervical cancer

For more support, visit jostrust.org.uk, call our Helpline on **0808 802 8000** or chat with others at jostrust.org.uk/forum



We are a member of the Patient Information Forum (PIF), an independent, not-for-profit organisation that supports high quality, evidence-based health information.

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