

WOMEN'S  
HEALTH

By Dr Shilpa McQuillan,  
accredited menopause  
specialist, GP and  
community gynaecologist

JANUARY often feels like a fresh start — new goals, new routines, maybe even a new diary full of good intentions. But while many of us plan to eat better or exercise more, there's one kind of "reset" that often gets forgotten, our health screenings.

Yes, life is busy. And yes, tests and check-ups can feel a little scary or uncomfortable. But taking time to look after your health now is one of the most powerful ways to protect your future self.

This month is Cervical Cancer Awareness Month, making it the perfect reminder to book your cervical screening 'smear' test — and to take stock of the rest of your body's needs, from breast checks to gut health.

Let's take a closer look at the key screenings worth keeping on your radar this year.



# From cervical smears to gut checks: Why January is the month to book your screenings

## CERVICAL SCREENING

Cervical screening (previously called a "smear test") looks for early changes caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), changes that if left untreated, could lead to cervical cancer.

It's available free on the NHS for anyone with a cervix aged 25 to 64 and usually takes just a few minutes. The test doesn't diagnose cancer; instead, it helps prevent it by finding and treating abnormal cells before they have the chance to become serious.

It's completely normal to feel anxious or hesitant about booking your appointment. You might worry about discomfort, feel embarrassed, or have had a difficult experience in the past. If that's the case, reach out for support, you can ask your GP surgery for a pre-appointment chat, or

talk through ways to make the test more comfortable, and so you feel safe and informed every step of the way.

So, if your letter is sitting on the kitchen counter or you've been meaning to book, let January be the month you do it. A short, simple test today can give you peace of mind for years to come.

## BREAST HEALTH: YOUR MONTHLY SELF CHECK-IN

Your breasts naturally change with your cycle, age, and hormones, so it's important to know what's normal for you. That way, you'll be more likely to notice any changes early.

Once a month, ideally at the same point in your menstrual cycle, take a few minutes to check your breasts, perhaps in the shower or while lying down. Look and feel for lumps, thickening, skin dimpling, nipple changes, discharge, or pain that doesn't go away.

If you're unsure what to look for, ask your healthcare professional to show you how to examine your breasts during your next appointment. They can guide you on what's normal and when to seek advice.

If you're aged 50 to 71, you'll be invited for a mammogram every three years through the NHS Breast Screening Programme. Most breast cancers found through screening are detected early, when treatment is most effective.

And if you ever notice something that feels unusual, no matter your age, don't wait. Speak to your GP. Regular checks help you understand your body, and getting any change looked at early is always the best step.

## GYNAECOLOGICAL HEALTH — GET TO KNOW YOUR BODY

Your vaginal and vulval health is just as important as any other part of your wellbeing — but it's something many of us feel shy talking about. Taking the time to

get to know what's normal for you means you're more likely to spot when something isn't right. So, grab that mirror and get looking.

Watch for any new or unusual signs, such as changes in discharge (colour, smell, or consistency); persistent itching, burning, or irritation; lumps, sores, or thickened skin on the vulva; or bleeding between periods, after sex, or post-menopause

It can be tempting to self-treat symptoms like itching or discharge with over-the-counter remedies, but if they don't improve or keep coming back, it's important to see a GP or women's health clinic. Correct diagnosis ensures you get the most appropriate and safe treatment.

Ovarian health also deserves attention, as early symptoms of ovarian problems can be subtle. Be mindful of persistent bloating or a feeling of fullness after eating small amounts; ongoing pelvic or abdominal discomfort; changes in urinary habits (needing to go more often or urgently, unable to fully empty your bladder); unexplained fatigue, weight changes (including unexplained weight gain around the middle), menstrual irregularities, changes to discharge especially after menopause

These signs often have harmless causes, but if you notice them consistently, it's best to get checked.

## BOWEL HEALTH — LISTENING TO YOUR GUT INSTINCT

Gut health plays a big role in how we feel day to day. It affects energy levels, hormones, mood, and even skin — yet it's often the part of our health we pay the least attention to.

If you're aged 60 to 74, you'll receive an NHS bowel cancer screening kit every two years. It's a simple, at-home test that looks for tiny traces of blood in your stool, often long before you'd notice any symptoms.

But bowel health matters at every age. While routine screening starts at 60, bowel cancer is increasingly being diagnosed in younger people too. That's why it's important to be aware of the early warning signs and to look after your gut even if you feel well.

You can support your digestive health by eating more fibre, drinking plenty of water, cutting back on processed and high-fat foods, not smoking, and staying active. These simple habits help keep your bowels regular and reduce inflammation in the gut.

See your GP if you notice: persistent bloating; changes in bowel habit such as looser stools, going more often, or the

opposite (ongoing constipation); blood in your stools; a feeling that you need to open your bowels but can't (tenesmus); lumps or discomfort in the rectum; or unexplained weight loss or tiredness

These symptoms are often caused by minor issues, but it's always best to get them checked early, just to be sure.

## VITAMINS & METABOLISM — A WINTER CHECK-IN

Feeling unusually tired, low, or sluggish this winter? You're not alone. Shorter days, less sunlight, and post-festive fatigue can leave anyone feeling off balance. Sometimes what feels like "just winter fatigue" can be a sign of low vitamin D, iron deficiency, or thyroid changes.

A simple blood test can help check what's really going on. If your energy, mood, or weight just don't feel like they've been playing fair lately, have a chat with your GP or pharmacist. These tests are easy to arrange and can offer real insight into how your body's doing.

Winter's also a great time for a general health check. Take a moment to check in with your routine — how's your diet, movement, and sleep? A few small tweaks can make a big difference to how you feel. It's also worth keeping an eye on things like blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar, especially if you're over 40 or have a family history of heart disease or diabetes. Prevention really is better than cure.

When it comes to supplements, be mindful. Marketing can sometimes promote unnecessary hormone panels or costly tests. Listen to your body, seek trusted advice, and remember—most vitamins and minerals come naturally from a balanced, varied diet.

## MIND-BODY CHECK: DON'T FORGET YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

When we think of "health checks," we often picture blood tests or physical screening appointments. But mental health deserves a check-in too. Stress, anxiety, and low mood do not just affect how you feel, they can show up in our body in surprising ways.

Gut health is one of the first to respond — stress can upset digestion, trigger bloating and heart burn, or even flare up IBS. The same goes for vaginal health. Ongoing stress or low immunity can make you more



prone to irritation or infections like thrush and UTIs.

Sometimes, anxiety can make normal symptoms feel frightening — a racing heart that feels like a heart attack, or brain fog that sparks fears of menopause or dementia. These experiences are real, and while they can overlap with other changes like menopause, caring for your mental wellbeing alongside hormonal or physical support can make a huge difference.

Taking time to rest, breathe, and reset isn't indulgent — it's essential. Think of it as another kind of health screening: one that helps your whole system find balance.

## MY TAKE HOME MESSAGE

January doesn't need to be about harsh resolutions or impossible goals. It can simply be a moment to pause, listen, and check in with your body. Think of booking your cervical screening, mammogram, or blood test as small but powerful acts of self-care, and important steps towards long-term health.

If you have questions or want to understand which screenings or checks are right for you, speak with a specialist. We're here to support you in making informed, confident choices for your wellbeing.

**Dr Shilpa McQuillan** leads the Berkshire Menopause Clinic in Henley and is an accredited menopause specialist, community gynaecologist and women's health GP. For more information, email [info@berkshiremenopaus clinic.com](mailto:info@berkshiremenopaus clinic.com) or visit [www.berkshiremenopaus clinic.com](http://www.berkshiremenopaus clinic.com)