

**stop  
cancer,  
before it  
starts**

# **A smear test could save your life**

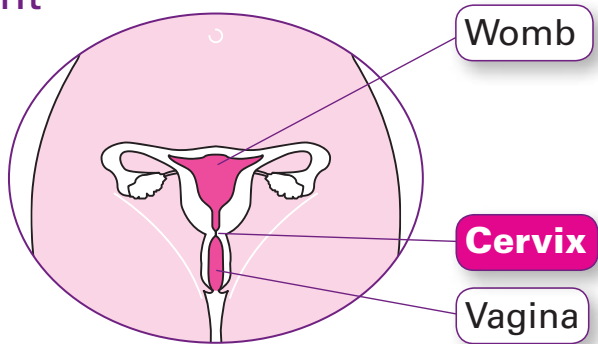
**Don't ignore your invitation.**

**NHS**  
  
SCOTLAND



**Healthier  
Scotland**  
Scottish  
Government

**Cervical screening is also known as the 'smear test'.** The test checks the cells from your **cervix** (the neck of the womb). It's designed to pick up any changes to the cells in your cervix so that they can be monitored or treated. Without treatment the changes can sometimes develop into cervical cancer.



**It's important to continue to go for screening every time you're invited.**

Your risk of cervical cancer increases if:

- you are or **have ever been sexually active** – this includes penetrative sex and other types of sexual activity, such as skin-to-skin contact of the genital area, or using sex toys
- you **smoke** – tobacco smoke affects the cells in your cervix.

It saves around 5,000 lives every year in the UK and prevents 8 out of 10 cervical cancers from developing.

It can pick up changes to your cells even if you look and feel healthy and have no symptoms.

**Don't ignore**  
the benefits  
of getting  
screened

It can stop cervical cancer before it starts.

It's your best protection against cervical cancer even if you've been immunised against HPV (see page 8).

**Book an appointment today with your GP surgery.**

If you have any additional needs please mention this when you book your appointment. You can also ask for a female nurse or GP, and can bring a friend or relative.

# What will happen at your appointment

Your smear test only takes five minutes and the nurse or GP can answer any questions you have.

You'll be asked to undress from the waist down (or just to remove your underwear if wearing a skirt). You'll also be given a sheet to cover yourself.

**It's normal for women to feel embarrassed, especially at their very first appointment, but remember we carry out smear tests every day.**



You'll be asked to lie on an examination bed. Your nurse or GP will gently insert a speculum (medical instrument) into your vagina to hold it open, so they can see your cervix. They will then gently brush cells from the cervix using a soft brush. The cells will be sent to a lab, where they'll be examined under a microscope.

Try to make an appointment for a day when you won't have your period. This is just because it's difficult to get a clear view of your cervix during your period.



**Your nurse or GP will put you at ease.**

**You undress behind a private screen.**

# Your questions answered

## When will I get my results?

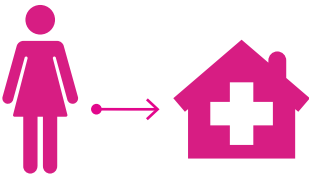
You'll usually get your results in the post within four weeks. If you'd like these to be sent to another address, please tell the person doing the test.

The results will also be sent to whoever took your test and your GP. If you haven't received your results within four to six weeks, contact the person who carried out your test.

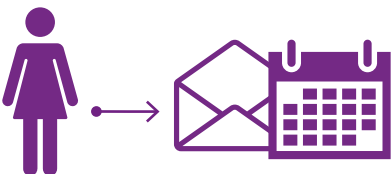
## 9 out of 10 women's results show no changes to cells in their cervix



For the 1 in 10 women who have changes, treatment will usually be for changes to the cells before they turn into cancer.



Some changes to cells will need further investigation at a specialist clinic.



Sometimes there are not enough cells in the sample to examine, or only minor changes to your cells. This is common and you'll be invited to repeat the test.

## **What causes changes in my cervix?**

Most changes in the cells of the cervix are caused by a virus called the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is very common – 8 out of 10 people in Scotland will catch it at some point in their lives. Because HPV usually has no symptoms, many people have it for months or years without knowing it.

Your body fights off most HPV infections naturally, but about 1 in 10 infections are harder to get rid of.

The types of HPV that can cause changes in the cells of your cervix are transmitted through sexual contact. This includes penetrative sex as well as other types of sexual activity, such as skin-to-skin contact of the genital area, or using sex toys.

## **Can the test detect all changes?**

No. The test can sometimes miss changes and changes can also happen between tests, so it's important to go for a smear test every time you're invited.

## **Are there any symptoms?**

There are usually no symptoms with changes in cervical cells and sometimes there are no symptoms with early-stage cervical cancer. Make an appointment with your GP as soon as possible if you have unusual discharge, or bleeding after sex, between periods or after the menopause.

# Do I need the test if...

## I'm a lesbian/bisexual?

**Yes.** ‘The types of HPV that can cause changes in the cells of your cervix are transmitted through any sexual contact. This includes penetrative sex and other types of sexual activity, such as skin-to-skin contact of the genital area, or using sex toys.’

## I've had the HPV vaccine?

**Yes.** ‘The vaccine doesn't protect against all types of HPV and will not protect against any HPV infections you picked up before you had the vaccine. So although the vaccine offers good protection, it's still important to attend for regular smear tests.’



## I haven't been sexually active for a long time?

**Yes.** ‘Many people have HPV for months or years without knowing it. So it's important that you have regular smear tests **if you have ever been sexually active.**’



**A smear test takes five minutes and could save your life. Don't ignore your invitation. If you're not sure about something, just ask.**

## **I've never had sex before?**

‘If you've **never** been sexually active there's less risk of you having HPV, so it's unlikely you'll need a smear test. Being sexually active includes penetrative sex and other types of sexual contact, such as skin-to-skin contact of the genital area, or using sex toys.’

## **I've been through the menopause?**

**Yes.** ‘You still need to check your cervix is healthy. Sometimes the test may be more uncomfortable because of dryness in the vagina after menopause. But your nurse or GP will have ways to reduce discomfort.’

## **I'm pregnant?**

‘You may not need a test. If you're pregnant or have a new baby, tell your nurse or GP when you're invited for a smear test.’

## **I've had a hysterectomy?**

‘You may not need a test. Check with your nurse or GP before making an appointment.’

## How often are women invited for their smear test?

All women in Scotland **aged 25 to 49** are offered a smear test **every three years**. Women **aged 50 to 64** are invited **every five years**. Women under the age of 25 who have already been invited for screening may be invited again before they reach 25. Some women are also offered screening more frequently, up to the age of 70 years.

## What happens to my test sample?

Your smear test is sent to a lab, which will keep it for 10 years in order to compare tests at different times. You will be contacted if the results suggest your care should be changed in any way. Your sample may also be tested again, including testing for HPV. This is so that the NHS can evaluate how well it's preventing cancer.

## How is my information used?

We keep a record of your personal screening information, including test results. All NHS staff must keep your personal health information confidential. We may use screening test information for research, education and training purposes. If this happens, we will remove your personal details.

We regularly review our screening service to make sure we offer you the best service possible. We use information from screening to identify areas for improvement and make sure that the cervical screening service meets agreed standards. Only authorised staff and appropriate healthcare professionals have access to this information.



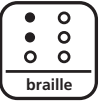
**All NHS staff  
are bound by  
a strict code of  
confidentiality.**

## Want to know more?

Talk to your nurse or GP, visit [nhsinform.scot](http://nhsinform.scot) or call **0800 22 44 88** (textphone **18001 0800 22 44 88**). The helpline is open every day and also provides an interpreting service.

Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust: visit [jostrust.org.uk](http://jostrust.org.uk) or call **0808 802 8000**.

This resource may also be made available on request in the following formats:



 **0131 314 5300**

 [nhs.healthscotland-alternativeformats@nhs.net](mailto:nhs.healthscotland-alternativeformats@nhs.net)

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