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Guidance

# Cervical screening: support for people who feel anxious about attending

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This publication is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cervical-screening-support-for-people-who-find-it-hard-to-attend/cervical-screening-support-for-people-who-feel-anxious-about-attending>

Public Health England created this information on behalf of the NHS. In this information, the word 'we' refers to the NHS service that provides screening.

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This information is for people who find it difficult to attend cervical screening (a smear test).

Some people feel anxious about attending because of:

- mental health issues
- previous traumatic experiences
- sexual abuse

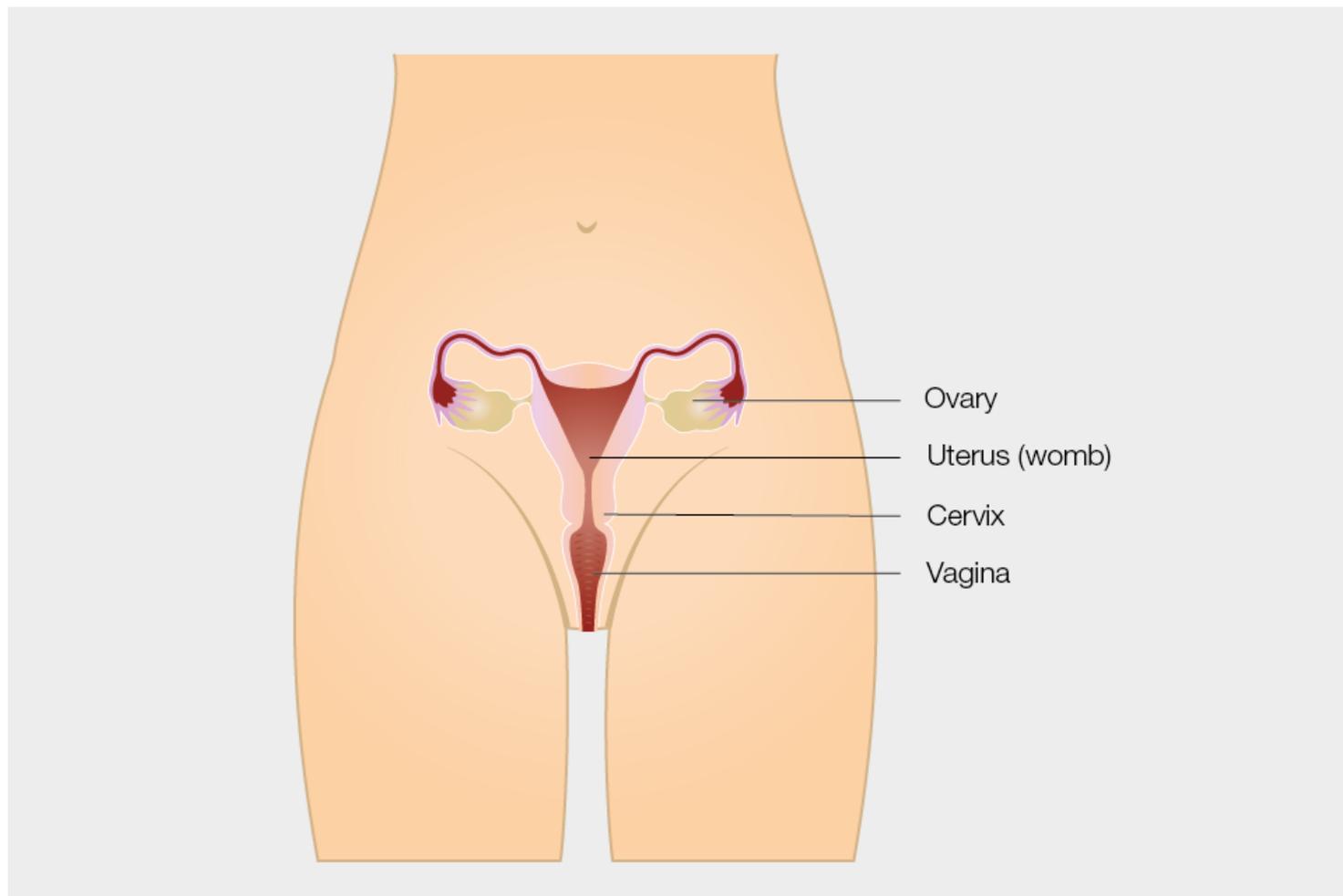
This information talks about what support is available if you feel anxious about attending cervical screening. You can use this information to help decide whether to attend and to plan for your screening appointment.

## Cervical screening

Cervical screening tests for human papillomavirus (HPV). This is a very common virus and most people get it at some point in their life. Some types of HPV can cause abnormal cells in the cervix, which can turn into cancer.

If HPV is found in your screening sample, it is then checked for abnormal cells. By finding and treating these early, most cases of cervical cancer can be prevented.

Your cervix is a part of your body that joins the top of your vagina to your womb.



Going for cervical screening when invited is the best way to protect yourself against cervical cancer.

You will get an invitation for cervical screening, through the post from your GP surgery, if:

- your contact details are up to date
- you are between 25 and 64 years old

In some areas, you may be able to arrange your appointment at a sexual health clinic instead of your GP surgery.

If you are not sure if you are due for cervical screening, you can ask your GP or health professional.

## Booking your appointment

You can request an appointment with a health professional to discuss your upcoming screening appointment or to help you prepare.

If you get anxious sitting in waiting rooms, let the receptionist know. You can ask to book the first appointment of the day, so that you do not have to wait long.

If you would prefer to be seen by a woman, ask for a female health professional.

Tell the receptionist if you would like a chaperone. This is a person, such as another health professional, friend, family member or carer, who can be present if required.

You may feel you need more time for your cervical screening. Ask the receptionist if you can book a longer appointment.

You may want to add a reminder in your mobile phone of your appointment.

## **Before your appointment**

You may find it helpful to:

- plan your journey
- bring something that is comforting or helps you relax, for example a music player or magazine
- wear a skirt or dress as you can keep these on during the test
- make plans for after your appointment, for example treating yourself to something nice and relaxing
- speak to the health professional beforehand to discuss your concerns if you think the test may be uncomfortable as they can offer support
- ask someone you trust to go with you, such as a friend, relative or mental health worker, who can also be with you after your appointment

## **Questions to ask the health professional**

It might be helpful to think of any questions you want to ask the health professional before your appointment.

You can ask for extra support if you:

- have a mental health condition
- hear voices
- take medication that makes you shake
- find it hard to leave your house
- sometimes find it hard to process information
- do not like to feel exposed or naked
- are embarrassed by your body
- have scars
- feel judged
- feel like a burden
- are afraid it will hurt
- may start to cry or freeze up
- may pass out or faint
- may have a panic attack
- get distressed during a physical examination
- have had a bad smear test experience
- have experienced trauma
- are a survivor of sexual violence
- are a survivor of female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C)

- want to be warned before the health professional touches you
- find that waiting rooms make your symptoms worse
- find that certain words or positions trigger anxiety attacks or flashbacks

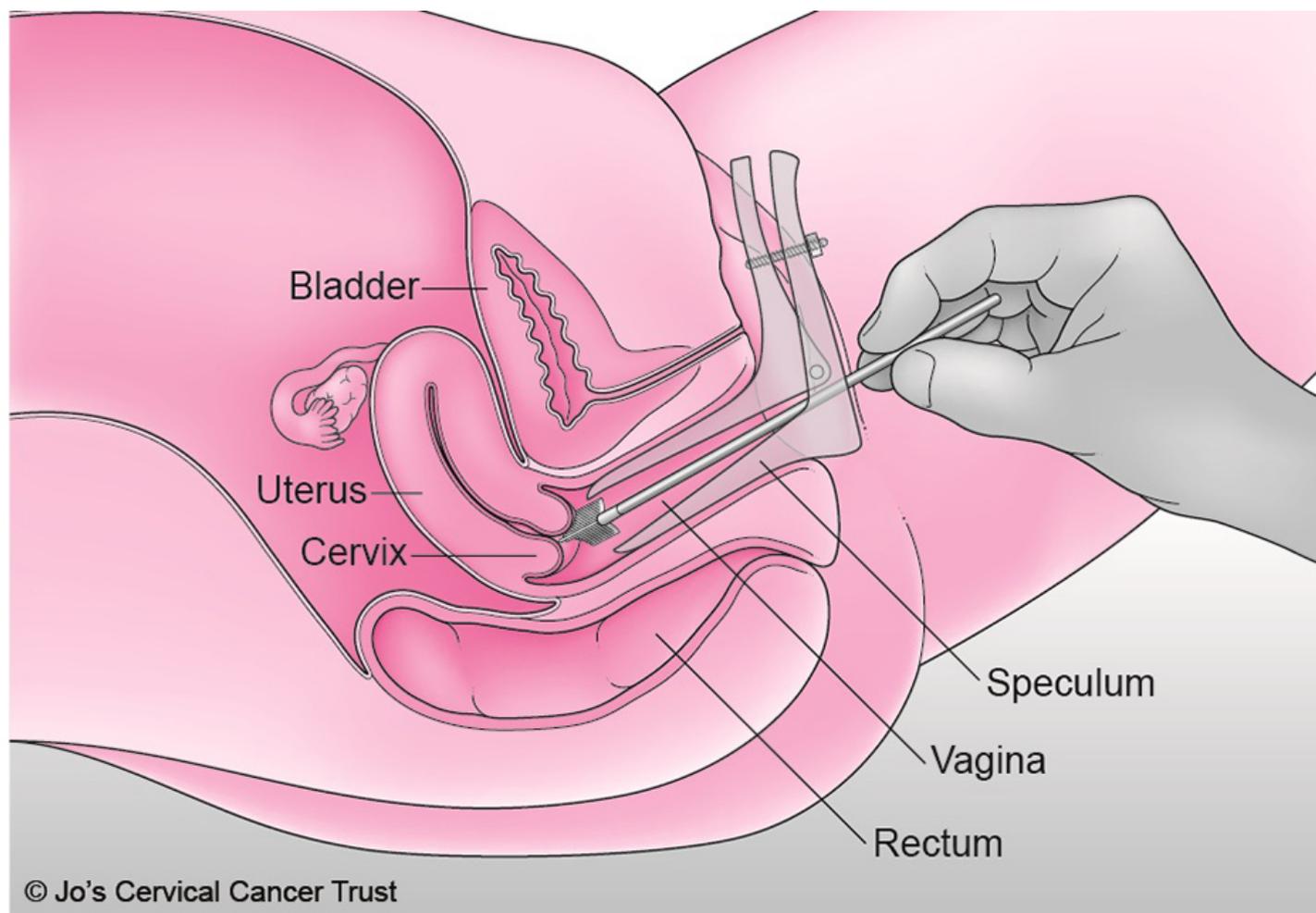
You may want to print out and fill in the extra support checklist

([https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/945733/Cervical\\_screening\\_extra\\_support\\_checklist.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/945733/Cervical_screening_extra_support_checklist.pdf)) to take with you to your screening test.

## During your appointment

The cervical screening test takes a few minutes. It could feel uncomfortable but should not be painful.

1. The health professional will explain the test at the start of your appointment.
2. Remember, you are in control during the test. It may help to agree a word or hand signal, so the health professional knows to stop immediately if you want them to.
3. You will have a private space to undress from the waist down and you will have a modesty sheet to cover you.
4. The health professional will work with you to make sure you are in a comfortable position for the test to be taken in.
5. A plastic or metal speculum will be gently put into your vagina. It opens so the health professional can see your cervix. Speculums come in a range of sizes. Talk to your health professional to discuss the size that is most appropriate for you.
6. The health professional will use a small, soft brush to take a sample of cells from your cervix.



## After the test

The sample of cells is sent to the laboratory for testing.

You will receive a copy of your results in the post. They should arrive within 2 weeks.

You may feel anxious while waiting for your results. It may help to speak with someone you trust about how you are feeling.

## Cervical screening results

### HPV negative

Most women get an HPV negative result. This means no further tests are needed and you will be called back for screening when your next test is due.

### HPV positive, no abnormal cells

If your sample is HPV positive, we also test it for abnormal cells. If none are found, your result will say you have HPV, but no abnormal cells. We will ask you to come for screening again sooner than usual. Your result letter will explain when.

### HPV positive, abnormal cells

If you have **H.P.V.** and any grade of abnormal cervical cells we will refer you for colposcopy (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cervical-screening-colposcopy/cervical-screening-having-a-colposcopy>).

A colposcopy is an examination to check if there are abnormal cells on your cervix and, if so, how serious they are.

## Unavailable or inadequate

Occasionally a sample may be called 'inadequate'. This may be due to a technical problem at the laboratory. If you have an inadequate test result, we will ask you to have cervical screening again in 3 months' time.

## Looking after your health

You will get another invitation through the post when you are due for cervical screening again.

It is important to be aware of symptoms, including:

- bleeding that is unusual for you – for example between regular periods or after sex
- bleeding after menopause
- unusual or unpleasant vaginal discharge

These symptoms do not mean you have cancer and are often caused by other things, but it is important to get them checked.

If you have symptoms, make an appointment to see your GP. You do not have to wait for your next cervical screening invitation.

## Getting support

If you need support, you:

- can talk to a trusted friend, relative or health professional
- may find it helpful to seek spiritual support from a religious or spiritual leader
- may want to talk to someone at Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust, The Havens, Samaritans or SANE

## Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust

Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust (<https://www.jostrust.org.uk/>) is a national charity dedicated to eliminating cervical cancer that has information and support about cervical screening, cell changes (abnormal cells) and cervical cancer – no question too big or small.

Helpline (<https://www.jostrust.org.uk/get-support/helpline>): 0808 802 8000

Ask the Expert (<https://www.jostrust.org.uk/get-support/ask-expert>) service.

## The Havens

The Havens (<https://www.thehavens.org.uk/>) are specialist centres in London for people who have been raped or sexually abused. Telephone 020 3299 6900 for urgent advice or an appointment.

## **My Body Back (London and Glasgow)**

My Body Back (<http://www.mybodybackproject.com/>) offers support to women to reclaim control of their body after sexual violence. It runs specialist clinics offering cervical screening and sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing in London and Glasgow for women and trans men who have experienced sexual violence.

Email: [info@mybodybackproject.com](mailto:info@mybodybackproject.com)

## **Samaritans**

Samaritans (<https://www.samaritans.org/>) is available round the clock, every single day of the year. You can talk to them any time you like, in your own way, about whatever's getting to you.

Call free, any time: 116 123

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

## **SANE**

SANE (<http://www.sane.org.uk/>) is a national mental health helpline offering specialist emotional support to anyone affected by mental illness.

SANEline: 0300 304 7000 (every day, 4.30 to 10pm).

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