

Spot cervical cancer early



Together we will beat cancer

Take charge

If you want to know more about spotting the signs of cervical cancer, this leaflet is for you.

In this leaflet you can find out about:

- possible symptoms
- HPV vaccination
- screening
- tips for telling your doctor if something's not quite right

Most cervical cancer cases are in women aged 25–34, but it's also common in older women. If you spot something unusual at any age, tell your doctor. In most cases it won't be cancer – but if it is, finding it at an early stage can make a real difference.



Listen to your body

When it comes to your health, remember you're in charge.

Talk to your doctor if you notice any unusual bleeding, or any other changes that aren't normal for you, including:

- Bleeding or pain, during or after sex
- Bleeding after the menopause
- Bleeding between periods
- Changes to your vaginal discharge

These are more likely to be signs of other common conditions – but it's still best to get them, or any other unusual changes, checked out.

Have you noticed any of these? You could highlight or circle them and show this page to your doctor.

What is a cervix?

Most people who were born female have a cervix. It is the entrance to the womb from the vagina.

What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is a common infection. Most people will get it at some point in their lives, and it usually doesn't cause problems. This is because our bodies are usually able to clear the infection. But some high-risk types of HPV can cause cell changes that can lead to cancer if they're not treated.

How is HPV passed on?

HPV passes from person to person through sexual contact. It is possible to become infected even if you've only had sexual contact with someone once.

Reducing the risk



The HPV vaccine: There is a safe and effective vaccine that protects against the main types of HPV and reduces the risk of cervical cancer. It is offered to all children aged 11–13.



Go smoke free: Smoking can make it harder to fight off HPV. Contact your free local stop smoking service or speak to a doctor, nurse or pharmacist for help stopping.

What is cervical screening and who is it for?

Screening is for people who don't have any symptoms.

It looks for HPV infection in cells and early cell changes. Any abnormal cells can then be treated, which can stop cervical cancer from developing in the first place. And the benefits of screening can last for years after you've been tested.

Anyone with a cervix can go for screening. If you're 25–64 and registered as female with the GP, you'll be sent an invitation. Read the information that comes with your invitation, so you can decide if you'd like to take part.

If you aren't invited for screening, but think it might still be relevant for you, speak to your GP.

You should still consider cervical screening even if you've had the HPV vaccine, as it doesn't protect you against all types of HPV.

And even if you've been screened, tell your doctor if you notice anything that's not normal for you.



It's your choice whether or not to go for cervical screening, but we encourage you to attend



Cervical screening saves thousands of lives every year in the UK

Is cervical screening for me if I've not been sexually active recently, have a long-term partner, or have only had one partner?

Yes. This is because HPV can stay in the body for a long time.

Is cervical screening for me if I've never had penetrative sex?

Yes. HPV can be passed on through any form of sexual contact. This includes vaginal, anal or oral sex, sharing sex toys, and any skin-to-skin sexual contact.

Do I need to prepare anything before my appointment?

No. There is nothing you need to do beforehand. It might seem a bit embarrassing, but nurses carry out hundreds of cervical screening tests each year. Just try not to make an appointment for when you're on your period.

Does cervical screening hurt?

For most people cervical screening won't be painful, but everybody is different. If you're worried it might be painful for you, here are some things that might help:

- At your appointment, ask the nurse to use a smaller speculum (the tool used to see the cervix) or to help you find a more comfortable position
- When booking, you can ask for a female or male nurse
- You could also ask if it's possible to bring someone with you for support
- Wearing a loose dress, skirt, or long top can help you feel more covered – you can keep this on during screening

Talk to your doctor

When you're worried that there's something wrong, telling a doctor can seem difficult.

Here are some ideas for how to get the most out of your appointment, whether it's via phone, video or a face to face conversation.



Be honest. Tell the doctor about anything unusual, even if it doesn't seem that important or you think it might be a bit embarrassing.



Be thorough. Mention all your symptoms and don't put it down to 'just getting older', or another health condition. If it's something that's bothering you, then your doctor will want to hear about it.



Stick with it. Don't worry you might be wasting your doctor's time. Even if you've spoken to them already, they want to know if your symptoms haven't gone away, or if something still doesn't feel quite right.



Be prepared. Think about how to describe any changes and how long you've had them for. Writing down what you want to say can help. It can also be useful to have a list of any medications that you take, including over-the-counter or herbal remedies.

Early diagnosis saves lives

Remember, when cervical cancer is spotted at an early stage, treatment is more likely to be successful. Thanks to research, treatments are kinder and more effective than ever.



How to find out more

We're online...



Find out more about spotting cancer early, including information about cancer screening across the UK, at cruk.org/spotcancerearly

...and on the phone



Our Nurse Helpline is there if you're looking for information or support. Just call **0808 800 4040**.

If you'd like to provide any feedback on this leaflet or would like to know more about the information sources used in creating it, please email publications@cancer.org.uk

And if you have any questions about Cancer Research UK or would like to support what we're doing, you can call **0300 123 1022**.