

Cervical Cancer

Signs, symptoms and screening



Key signs and symptoms

01

**Unusual vaginal
bleeding**

02

**Changes to vaginal
discharge**

03

**Pain or discomfort
during sex**

04

**Pain in lower
back or pelvis**

These symptoms can be caused by conditions other than cancer but it's important to get them checked by a GP.

Cervical screening basics and next steps

What is cervical screening?

Cervical screening (sometimes called a smear test) checks the health of the cervix and helps prevent cervical cancer. It does not test for cancer but for high-risk HPV (human papillomavirus), which can cause cervical cell changes.

Who is cervical screening for?

Women and anyone with a cervix aged 25–64 will be invited every five years.

How will you be invited for screening?

GPs offer cervical screening to eligible people who are due or overdue, and will send you a letter inviting you to book an appointment. However, you can also book a screening test at any time.

Where do screening appointments take place?

Although screening usually happens at your GP surgery there are other options available. These can include:

- **GP surgeries.** During routine hours
- **NHS community clinics.** Often offering more flexible times
- **Hospital-based screening clinics.** Many run early morning, evening, or weekend sessions
- **Specialist sexual health or women's health clinics.** Depending on local services

Your invitation letter will explain how to book and the options available in your area, and your local NHS website also lists screening locations and opening times.

From 2026 you may be offered a human papillomavirus (HPV) home testing kit if you're eligible for cervical screening but rarely or never attend. This would mean you could take a sample at home and return it for testing.

When should you contact a GP?

- ✓ If you notice any of the symptoms on page one.
- ✓ If symptoms persist or feel unusual for you.
- ✓ If your cervical screening is overdue.
- ✓ If you feel worried – it's always better to check.

70–80%

of cervical cancer cases can be prevented by screening.

30%

of women aren't sure if they're eligible for cervical screening.

27–31%

delay screening because they have no symptoms.

Common myths about cervical screening

Myth *“Screening tests for cancer”*

Fact Screening tests for HPV and abnormal cells, not cancer. It helps prevent cancer.

Myth *“If I had the HPV vaccine, I don't need screening”*

Fact You still need screening – the vaccine protects against most, but not all, high-risk types of HPV.

Myth *“Screening is only for sexually active people”*

Fact Anyone with a cervix should be screened, even if they're not currently sexually active.

Myth *“HPV only affects people with multiple partners”*

Fact HPV is very common and can be caught from a single partner.

Myth *“I'm too old to get HPV”*

Fact HPV can affect adults of any age, and women up to 64 should keep attending screening.

Myth *“If I feel fine, I don't need screening”*

Fact HPV often has no symptoms. You can feel completely well and still need screening.

Myth *“Screening is painful”*

Fact It can be uncomfortable, but it shouldn't be painful. You can ask for adjustments, for example; a smaller speculum or different position, and pause the test if you need to.