



Cervical Screening

A guide for survivors
of rape, sexual assault
and sexual abuse

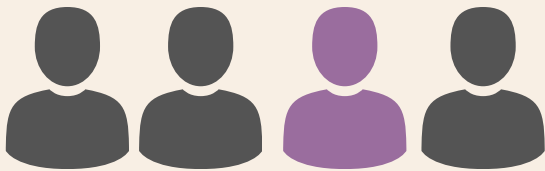
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Background

The Survivors Trust and The Eve Appeal are collaborating as part of the **#CheckWithMeFirst campaign** to help raise awareness of the challenges survivors of rape, sexual abuse and sexual violence may face when accessing cervical screening.



1 in 4 girls

experience childhood sexual abuse

1 in 3 adult women

experience sexual violence at
some time in their life



You are not alone

Many survivors of sexual assault or sexual abuse find healthcare appointments distressing, particularly appointments which may involve physical examinations such as cervical screening.

This guide outlines information about attending cervical screening for survivors of rape, sexual abuse or assault, and offers tips to which may help to make you feel more comfortable about your appointment.





What is cervical screening?

Cervical screening tests help prevent cervical cancer. During a cervical screening test a plastic instrument called a speculum is used to open the vagina and, using a small brush (about 1.5cm across), a healthcare professional takes a sample of cells from the cervix. These cells are then checked for High-risk Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), a very common virus that causes 99.8% of cervical cancers.

What is HPV?

HPV is a very common infection, over 80% of people will get it at some point in their lives and for the majority, it will be cleared by the immune system quickly. In some cases, HPV can persist and can on the rare occasion develop into cancer – head and neck, anal, penile, vulval, vaginal or cervical cancer.

A cervical screening test is used to help pick up signs of abnormal cells on the cervix before it might turn into cancer, so that the person can be treated, and cancer prevented. The test usually takes less than five minutes.



Who is eligible for cervical screening?

All women and people with a cervix aged 25-64 are eligible to attend a screening appointment every 3-5 years, depending on their age. However, if you are registered as male with your GP, you may not be sent an invitation letter. If you are over 25 and have a cervix, call your GP and you will be able to get booked in for your screening.

If HPV is found in the sample, then the cells are checked for changes, which if left untreated could progress to a cervical cancer. If you're found to have pre-cancerous cell changes then depending on the stage of the abnormal cells (how severe the cell changes are), you may be offered treatment to remove the abnormal cells and prevent them from developing into cervical cancer.

Attending your cervical screening

If you find cervical screening appointments difficult, you are not alone. Many people get anxious about attending healthcare appointments, especially pelvic examinations. For survivors of sexual abuse or other psychological trauma, these appointments may be particularly difficult and can sometimes trigger unwanted thoughts and memories of abuse.

Over the next three pages you will find helpful tips you may wish to try to help make the appointment easier for you to manage.



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Tips for survivors of sexual assault or abuse attending cervical screening appointments

Before your appointment

- You can make an appointment to **discuss the screening test beforehand** so you can meet the healthcare professional and talk through the process.
- You can **ask for a double appointment** when booking your screening test to **give yourself more time** to talk things through and go at a slower pace.
- You can request an appointment with a healthcare professional of a particular gender.
- If possible, ask to be seen by a doctor or nurse that you know and trust.
- **Mention any adjustments** that would make you feel more comfortable – speak with your doctor or nurse to see if they are possible.
- A chaperone will be present for the appointment, but you can also **ask to bring someone in with you for support** – this could be a friend or family member. *Some clinics and centres may have additional restrictions in place due to the coronavirus pandemic. It may help to call ahead of your appointment to check that this is possible.*
- Think about **any questions** you have before going to your appointment and **write them down to take with you.**

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Tips to help communicate your needs during your appointment:

- If you feel comfortable doing so, you can talk to your doctor or nurse and let them know that you are survivor of sexual violence or that you have experienced a psychologically traumatic event. This may help the healthcare professional to make the process easier for you. You might find it easier to write this down – **[click here](#)** to download a free template to help explain to your doctor or nurse that you are a survivor. Whether you disclose your experience to a healthcare professional or not is completely your choice.
- Before the screening begins, **let the healthcare professional know if you find any particular words distressing or triggering.** This will help the healthcare professional to use alternative language that will be less triggering for you.
- Remember, you are in control of the situation and you can ask the healthcare professional to stop at any time for any reason. **Agree a way for you to communicate this** with the healthcare professional before the test begins – for example, you could raise your hand.





Tips to ease anxiety during your appointment:

- Grounding techniques such as relaxation and breathing exercises may help you to feel less anxious. **Click here** to download the #CheckWithMeFirst guide on grounding techniques. You can practice these before your appointment to find out what works best for you.
- You may find it helpful to listen to music, an audiobook or a podcast to help you feel more relaxed – feel free to take headphones along with you to do so.
- There are different sized speculums – **asking for the smallest sized speculum that is appropriate for you** may help you feel more comfortable.
- You can **guide the speculum in yourself** if that may help you.
- Wear clothes that you feel comfortable in. A long skirt, if you wear skirts, will enable you to have the test and leave your skirt on.
- Remember, there is no expectation for you to go through with the test at your appointment. **It is okay to try again at a later date or decide that screening is not something you are able to do.** Your doctor or nurse will be able to talk you through your risks and options and help you decide the best course of action for you.



Looking after yourself following your cervical screening

- Plan something enjoyable after the event – take some time to do something that you find fun or relaxing, or make plans to meet up with a friend or loved one
- If you are feeling overwhelmed following your screening, ask if there is a quiet space you can sit to calm down before you leave. This may not always be possible, depending on your service provider
- If you would like support following your appointment you can call The Survivors Trust's free, confidential helpline (0808 801 0818).

Most importantly, remember to be kind to yourself. Your trauma responses are completely normal, and are not your fault.



HPV Self-sampling

HPV self-sampling tests are currently being trialled in a few areas of the UK. Self-sampling tests allow women and people with a cervix to take a sample from the vagina with a swab (similar to STI tests) in the comfort of their own home. This will then be sent off and tested for signs of HPV. If HPV is present, then you would be asked to visit your GP surgery for a cervical screening test to take a sample from the cervix to look for signs of abnormal cells. If your area is participating in this trial, you may receive a letter offering you a HPV self-sample kit. If the trial is successful, NHS HPV self-sampling kits may be rolled out across the UK.



Useful links and contacts

The Eve Appeal

Leading UK national charity funding research and raising awareness into the five gynaecological cancers - womb, ovarian, cervical, vulval and vaginal.

[Click here to visit The Eve Appeal website](http://eveappeal.org.uk) (eveappeal.org.uk)

Ask Eve helpline: 0808 802 0019

Email: **nurse@eveappeal.org.uk**

The Survivors Trust

Membership organisation representing over 120 specialist support services for survivors of rape, sexual abuse, and sexual violence in the UK.

[Click here to visit The Survivors Trust website](http://www.thesurvivorstrust.org)

(www.thesurvivorstrust.org)

Helpline: 08088 010818 (For survivors, professionals, family and supporters)

Email: **info@thesurvivorstrust.org**

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- **[Click here](#)** to view our #CheckWithMeFirst animation
- **[Click here](#)** to download the #CheckWithMeFirst Grounding Techniques resource from The Survivors Trust website
- **[Click here](#)** to download a template you can take with you to your cervical screening appointment.

The Survivors Trust's **#CheckWithMeFirst** training provides healthcare practitioners and patient-facing staff with the tools to provide trauma-informed care for survivors accessing healthcare.

Join our training to discover how small changes can make a big difference; helping to reduce missed appointments, managing vicarious trauma, and improving healthcare outcomes.

Get in touch with us via email –
nhs.checkwithmefirst@thesurvivorstrust.org



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If you would prefer this guide in an alternative format, please contact us.