

Cervical screening made simple: What to know in 2026



Cervical screening is one of the most effective ways to protect your health, yet many women feel unsure about what to expect or delay their appointment because it feels uncomfortable or overwhelming.

Life gets busy, experiences vary, and it's normal to have questions. Lots of people also feel nervous, worried about pain, or unsure what happens in the room. This guide aims to make the process feel clearer, calmer, and more doable.

Screening isn't a test for cancer. It's a quick check that **looks for HPV** (a very common virus) and **early changes** in the cervix so they can be treated long before they become serious. This early detection is a major reason cervical cancer rates have fallen in countries with strong screening programmes.

This guide breaks down who gets invited in 2026, what actually happens during a screening, and simple ways to feel more at ease before your appointment. It also **includes tips** for anyone who has felt pain, had a difficult experience in the past, or needs **extra support**.

Who gets invited for screening?

In 2026, cervical screening invitations continue to follow national guidelines in both the UK and the Republic of Ireland. The exact schedule depends on your age and where you live, but the aim is the same everywhere: to **find early changes** long before they cause problems. If you're a trans man or non-binary person with a cervix, you're also eligible for screening. You can request a private slot or ask for a clinician who understands your needs.

United Kingdom

Women and people with a cervix are invited:

Age 25–49: every 3 years

Age 50–64: every 5 years

You need to be registered with a GP to receive your invitation letters.

Republic of Ireland

People with a cervix aged 25–65 can book a free screening:

Age 25–29: every 3 years

Age 30–65: every 5 years

If you've never been screened, or you're overdue, you can usually book directly even without waiting for a reminder letter.



If you're not sure whether you're due

Most programmes allow you to check online using your **health service portal** or by contacting your GP. If you've moved, changed address, or haven't received a letter, you can still book.

Instead of booking straight away, start by checking your due date. Once you know where you stand, the next step often feels easier.

What actually happens during a cervical screening?

A cervical screening appointment is usually quick, often **5 minutes** of the **10-minute visit**, and is carried out by a nurse or trained clinician. The aim is to look for **high-risk HPV** and early cell changes, not to diagnose cancer.

If you've had pain or a difficult experience before, **you can say so at the start**. The clinician can adjust the angle, pace, or size of the speculum, and you can pause at any point.

Here's **what to expect**, step by step:



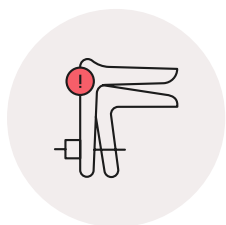
1. A short conversation first

You'll be asked about your last period, any symptoms, contraception, and previous screening results. It's also the right moment to mention anything that might make the appointment uncomfortable. The clinician can adapt it to support you.

You can say:

- *"I get tense during exams."*
- *"Please go slowly."*
- *"I might need a pause."*

If you're pregnant, recently had a baby, or have had pelvic surgery, let them know so they can adjust the position.



2. Getting comfortable

You'll undress from the waist down behind a curtain and lie on an exam couch. A sheet or towel is offered for privacy. If you feel anxious, take a few slow breaths before the speculum goes in.



3. The speculum goes in (slowly and gently)

A small, smooth plastic speculum is inserted so the clinician can see the cervix. **You can:**

- request a smaller speculum
- take your time
- pause or stop at any point
- use breathing to relax the pelvic floor

You're in control throughout.

If it feels uncomfortable:

- ask for more lubricant
- try adjusting your hips slightly
- unclench your jaw or relax your shoulders (this can help the pelvic floor soften)



4. A quick sample is taken

A soft brush collects a small sample of cells from the cervix. It takes seconds and may feel unusual or slightly scratchy, but not usually painful.



5. And that's it

You can get dressed straight away. Most people continue with their day as usual.



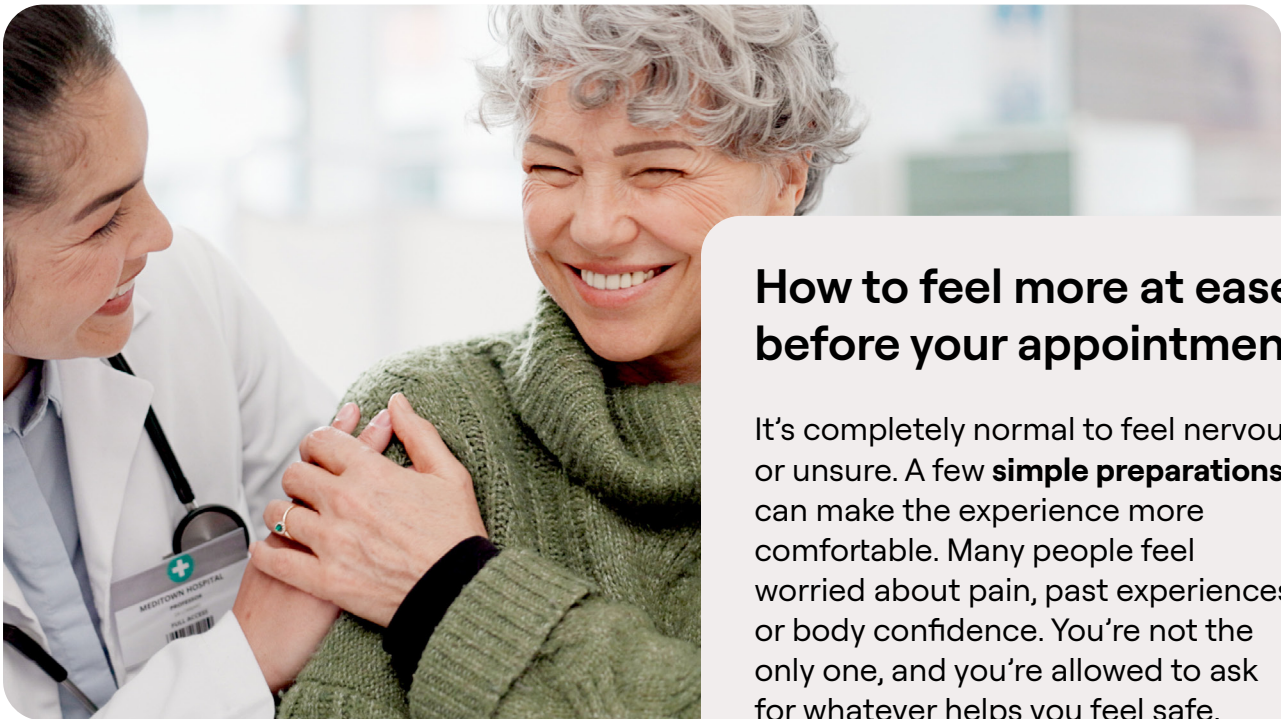
What the test checks

Your sample is tested for high-risk HPV, a common virus that most people will get at some point. The body usually clears it on its own. Persistent HPV infections, however, can cause **cell changes** over many years.

If HPV is found, your sample is then **checked for any early changes**.

A positive HPV result does not mean cancer. It simply means you'll be monitored more closely. Many people have HPV at some stage, and most infections clear without treatment.

If early changes are found, they can usually be **treated quickly** with a simple outpatient procedure.



How to feel more at ease before your appointment

It's completely normal to feel nervous or unsure. A few **simple preparations** can make the experience more comfortable. Many people feel worried about pain, past experiences, or body confidence. You're not the only one, and you're allowed to ask for whatever helps you feel safe.

Choose a calmer moment in your day

Avoid scheduling your appointment between intense meetings or errands. A quieter slot can help your muscles, especially the pelvic floor, relax.

If choosing a time feels stressful, start by checking clinic hours. Pick a day first, then choose a slot later.

Wear clothes that make changing easier

A skirt, dress, or loose trousers can make the process feel quicker and more private.

Tell the nurse what you need

You can ask for:

- a smaller speculum
- extra explanation
- more time
- a slower pace
- to stop at any point

Small scripts you can use:

- *"I get anxious during exams."*
- *"Can we go slowly?"*
- *"If I tense up, I might need a pause."*
- *"I've had a difficult experience before."*

Clinicians do these tests every day and are **used to supporting people** who feel nervous.

Use breathing to help your muscles relax

Try inhaling for four seconds and exhaling for six to help the pelvis and stomach soften before the test. You can also do one long exhale as the speculum goes in. Many people find this helps reduce tension.

Bring someone with you if it helps

Some clinics allow a friend or partner to wait with you or stay in the room. You can also ask for a chaperone.

Remember what screening is for

Screening prevents cancer, it doesn't look for cancer. Detecting early changes means they can be treated easily, often with a simple outpatient procedure. You're doing something positive for your future health.



When dryness makes a smear hard

Some women find a smear test very hard because of vaginal dryness. This can happen during perimenopause, menopause, breastfeeding, or when taking the mini pill. Dryness can make the test feel painful, and for some, it can make the test **impossible to complete**.

You can ask your GP for a short course of **vaginal oestrogen** to use in the weeks before their smear. This often makes the test much more comfortable and may also help with ongoing dryness day to day. If the nurse notices significant dryness during the appointment, they may suggest stopping and using oestrogen cream or pessaries for a few weeks before trying again.

When to get support or speak to a GP

Most people attend their screening and continue with their day, but extra support is sometimes helpful. It's very common to delay screening because of nerves, past discomfort, or not knowing what to expect. It's never too late to book, and **no one will judge you** for taking your time.

Before your appointment

Speak with a GP or practice nurse if:

- previous screenings were uncomfortable
- you have symptoms like bleeding between periods, after sex, or unusual discharge
- you're pregnant or recently had a baby
- you're worried because of trauma or medical conditions
- you're unsure whether you're due

They can **adjust the experience** so it feels safer and easier.



After your appointment

Most results fall into one of three categories:

- **No HPV found:** return to routine screening
- **HPV found but no cell changes:** repeat screening sooner
- **HPV and cell changes:** referral for a colposcopy

If anything feels unclear or worrying, a GP can talk through your results and next steps. A positive HPV result does not mean cancer. It usually just means closer monitoring.

If you develop symptoms at any time

Bleeding between periods, bleeding after sex, unexplained pelvic pain, or unusual discharge should always be checked, even if you recently had a screening. These changes can have many causes but **should never be ignored**.

If you feel unsure whether a symptom matters, booking a quick check is always the best step.



How HealthHero can help

With HealthHero, you can book an online GP consultation quickly and confidentially. Ideal if you feel nervous about screening, have symptoms you want checked, or need help understanding your results.

A doctor can:

- explain what your screening results mean
- help you understand when you're due and how to book
- talk through worries about discomfort, trauma, or past experiences
- advise on symptoms that need checking
- discuss next steps if you've been referred for colposcopy
- offer guidance that fits your age, health history, and day-to-day life

Cervical screening is a strong way to protect your long-term health, and you don't have to manage the process alone. Even a short conversation with a doctor can make the next step feel calmer and easier to approach.

Contact [HealthHero](#) today for more support and advice. We're with you every step of the way.