****

**CERVICAL SCREENING**

**Q & A FROM THE EVE APPEAL FOR YOUNG WOMEN PRIOR TO FIRST SCREENING**

The idea of having a smear test can be worrying for some young women, especially if you do not really know what to expectand so often are too embarrassed to ask. Overcoming this ‘wall of embarrassment’ is vital to encourage young women to attend regular screening. Here we hope to answer the questions they are too embarrassed to ask:

* **What’s the difference between ‘cervical screening’ and a ‘smear test’**
	+ From a patient point of view there is no real difference. We used to use a wooden spatula to sample the cells at the cervix, and then smear the sample along a slide. That resulted in rather unsatisfactory samples and around 10% of patients had to return for a repeat test. The introduction of liquid based cytology in which the sample is suspended in liquid and then transferred evenly to a slide, provides a much more reliable sample and women are no longer being recalled because of technically unsatisfactory tests. The term smear no longer seems appropriate.
* **How will I know when it’s time to go? Will I automatically be sent an appointment?**
	+ Yes, soon after your 25th birthday you will receive a letter from your local Primary Care Trust telling you about the screening programme and inviting you to call to make an appointment at your local clinic or surgery. In most cases you will be seeing either the GP or a practice nurse.
* **Will it hurt? And how long for?**
	+ For most women screening is not painful at all however some women can experience a little discomfort. If you do experience any pain you should mention it to the doctor or nurse.
* **Will it make me bleed?**
	+ Not usually but a small amount of ‘spotting’ can happen to some women but is quite normal and should stop in a few hours.
* **Will I need to shave ‘that area down below’ before my appointment?**
	+ No not at all. Hair doesn’t affect taking the sample
* **What if I’m having a period?**
	+ Don’t go. The best time for cervical screening is midway through your menstrual cycle. You will often be asked about the date of your last period when you book the appointment. If you’re not asked it may be a good idea to try to plan your appointment for about 10 to 20 days after your last period.
* **Will I have to take my clothes off?**
	+ You shouldn’t be asked to remove all your clothes but you will be asked to undress below the waist.
* **What should I wear for the appointment?**
	+ Separate tops and bottoms would be ideal. If you wear trousers or a skirt then you will be able to keep your top half clothes on. If you’re very shy and don’t like taking your clothes off, a loose skirt would be ideal as it can be lifted up for the examination and all you’ll need to take off is your pants.
* **What will actually happen?**
	+ The nurse or doctor will gently insert an instrument called a speculum into your vagina. Quite often the nurse or doctor will warm the speculum and smear a lubricant over the tip to make it more comfortable. The speculum will gently open the vagina slightly, just enough for the doctor or nurse to see the cervix. He/she will then use a tiny brush to take some of the cells from the surface of the cervix. These cells will be preserved in fluid and sent to the laboratory for examination.
* **Does the speculum come in different sizes?**
	+ Yes, we’re all different and different people can require different sizes of speculum. The Nurse/doctor will know which one is best for you.
* **How long will it take?**
	+ The actual test should only take about 3 minutes but you should allow 15 mins for the appointment to give the doctor/nurse time to explain the procedure and make you comfortable.
* **I’d find it quite embarrassing – can I be sure it will be a woman who does the test?**
	+ When you call to make the appointment, you should ask to see a female doctor or nurse. If neither is available you could rebook for another time. You are quite entitled to insist on seeing a female but should also remember that male doctors and nurses are carrying out similar procedures all the time and will put you at ease. Likewise, if you prefer to see a male doctor or nurse just mention it at the time of making the appointment
* **What if I get there and it’s a male doctor**
	+ This shouldn’t happen if you’ve previously asked for an appointment with a female but if there’s a mix up and this happens then a quiet chat with the receptionist should sort it out. Don’t feel obliged to see him if you’re not comfortable with it – just ask for another appointment when a female will be available.
* **I’m a lesbian and have heard that as HPV is sexually transmitted I don’t need a smear test. Is this true?**
	+ Definitely not. All women between the ages of 25 and 64 who have a cervix need to have regular cervical screening tests, regardless of whether or not they’ve slept with a man. The Lesbian and Gay Foundation have a very good website that you may find helpful. [www.lgf.org.uk/screening](http://www.lgf.org.uk/screening)
* **I’m a virgin – do I still need to go for screening?**
	+ Cervical Screening is advisable for all women over 25 years. Most abnormal cells are linked to HPV infection which is sexually transmitted but all women in England should attend regular screening from the age of 25 years.
* **Can I take a friend/relative with me for moral support?**
	+ Of course. Your friend or relative would normally wait in the waiting room while you see the nurse or doctor but if you specifically request their presence most practices will oblige.
* **Will I be able to talk to the doctor or nurse about any worries I have before the examination?**
	+ Of course. The doctor/nurse will chat to you about what they’re going to do and answer any questions you may have.
* **Where will the screening be done? Is it a private place?**
	+ You will be in a private examination room completely out of sight
* **How many people will be in the room?**
	+ In almost all instances it will just be you and the nurse or doctor taking the sample. Very occasionally medical students may be at the surgery who would like to observe. If this is the case you would normally be told at the time you make the appointment. The receptionist will ask if you’re comfortable with their presence. If not you should say so.
* **Will I be lying down or sitting up?**
	+ You will be asked to undress from the waist down and lie on your back on an examination bed with your knees up and slightly apart
* **What if I get turned on?**
	+ This unlikely to happen as the doctor/nurse will not be touching your clitoris however should this happen don’t worry it won’t be the first time and won’t affect the outcome of the test.
* **I’ve got Thrush – does that matter?**
	+ No it should not stop you having your smear
* **I’ve got a sexually transmitted disease/infection – does that matter?**
	+ No, you will still be able to have your smear however it is helpful to let the doctor or nurse know beforehand if you do have a STD/STI so they can make a note of it
* **I’ve got a really embarrassing scar/birthmark/deformity and I don’t like people seeing it.**
	+ Doctors and nurses spend their lives looking at scars and deformities – it’s all part of their work and they probably won’t even notice. However, if you are very worried you could talk to them about it and they may suggest an alternative but more comfortable position for the screening
* **If I haven’t had sex before does that mean it will hurt more?**
	+ It shouldn’t hurt but a small number of women can experience discomfort. You should mention to the nurse/doctor if you have never had sex so that they are aware of your concerns and can talk you through the procedure
* **I’ve recently been for an STI/STD test. Do I still need to attend screening?**
	+ Yes – abnormal cells can only be identified by taking a sample of cells from the cervix. STI clinics do not perform this procedure. If you tested positive for an STI you should check with the sexual health clinic before making a screening appointment
* **I am/might be pregnant. Should I still go for screening**
	+ You may find some doctors surgeries / clinics are more reluctant to take a smear in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy however they will advise you if this is the case
* **I’ve had HPV vaccinations – do I still need to be screened?**
	+ Yes. HPV vaccinations can prevent up to 90% of abnormal cells developing into cervical cancer but not 100%
* **When will I get my results? Will the doctor call me or will I have to ask for them and will I need another appointment?**
	+ You will get your results approximately 2 weeks after your smear however this can vary depending on where you live. A letter will be sent to your home advising you of your results.. It is unlikely that you will need another appointment if everything appears normal.
* **I’m nervous and suddenly need a wee – what do I do?**
	+ Being nervous can sometimes have this effect. There is nothing to worry about – just ask the nurse if you can go to the loo.
* **Will the screening identify other gynaecological cancers (ovarian/womb/vaginal/vulvar)?**
	+ No – cervical screening only identifies abnormal cells in the cervix. You should be aware of the signs and symptoms of the other cancers which currently have no screening programme available. See [www.eveappeal.org.uk](http://www.eveappeal.org.uk) for signs and symptoms information.
* **I’ve heard that boys can carry HPV – can they be screened as well?**
	+ Yes, boys get HPV (that's where the girls get it from) but instead of cervical cancer it can manifest as different types of cancer ie anal cancer, mouth and throat cancers and penile cancer. Currently there is no screening recommendation for boys.
* **Is it ok to have sex before the screening?**
	+ If you are using gels or pessaries it is advisable to wait 24hrs as these can occasionally have an effect on the sample reading
* **I am taking contraception/hormonal medication, will this affect my having a smear?**
	+ You are likely to be asked if you are on any hormonal contraception/medication however this will not prevent you having your smear and neither will a coil insitu.