

cervical screening

help, information and advice



MARIE STOPES
INTERNATIONAL

Many women feel a little nervous about having a smear test, yet regular screening has saved thousands of lives by discovering problems before they become serious. So do not be nervous – be confident that you are taking control of your health!

This booklet explains more about cervical screening and your appointment with Marie Stopes International.

What is a cervical smear test?

A cervical smear test is a way to check up on the health of your cervix – the entrance to your womb (uterus) which is situated at the top of your vagina.

Why is it important?

The test looks for changes in the cells of your cervix. Changes happen very slowly but can lead to serious problems like cervical cancer. Around 3, 000 women are diagnosed with cancer of the cervix in the UK every year. You may not experience any symptoms beforehand, until the condition is at an advanced stage.

If abnormal cells are noticed at screening, they can be closely observed and/or treated to prevent cancer from developing. Regular screening has been proved to reduce the risk of cancer by 90%.

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How often should I be screened?

The National Health Service recommend that women have their first cervical smear test at 25 years, unless they have any particular problems before that age. They are invited for a cervical smear test every three years after that. This is fine, but if you come to a Marie Stopes centre, we will normally offer an annual test as part of Well Woman screening. Having a regular smear test every year offers you the best chance of catching any problems early, and can put your mind at rest.

Your appointment at a Marie Stopes centre

Cervical smears are available at our centres on their own, or as part of a Well Woman check. As we explain below, we use a method called liquid cytology. This is the most up to date and reliable way to carry out cervical screening.

Making an appointment

Screening is available at our centres in London, Bristol and Leeds. To make an appointment, call our central booking service on **0845 300 0460**.

- You cannot be screened during your period, so the best time to make your appointment is roughly two weeks after the first day of your period. (Between days 10 and 16 of your monthly cycle).
- We try to use women practitioners whenever possible. However, if you definitely do not feel comfortable seeing a male doctor, then please let the booking service know.

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How is a cervical smear taken?

The practitioner (either a specialist nurse or doctor) will ask you to lie on a couch and will gently insert an instrument called a speculum into your vagina, so they can view your cervix.

A brush or spatula is used to take a sample. They pick up cells from inside the opening of the cervix.

Does it hurt?

The fear, along with embarrassment, puts some women off having a smear test. Do not worry! Some women find it momentarily uncomfortable but it is extremely quick. Many women will tell you that it is fine and worth a little discomfort for piece of mind. It is best to relax as much as possible.

How is the sample tested?

The laboratory will examine your sample for any cells which appear to be irregular. Sometimes it is difficult to view the cervical cells as they may be mixed up with blood and mucous.

To overcome this, the liquid cytology method we use at Marie Stopes allows a clearer view of the cells by filtering out any blood and mucous. It is therefore a much more reliable test.

Extra screening: Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

The sample taken during your smear can also be used to test for HPV.

HPV is a common viral infection which can be passed on during sex. It can show up in the cells of your cervix and sometimes causes an abnormal or unclear smear test result.

There are many different types of HPV, some of which have been linked to cervical cancer.

The test can spot HPV even before changes can be seen on the cervix. This means women at risk from cervical cancer can be identified much earlier and watched closely. Ask us if you would like a HPV test. There is an additional fee for this.

HPV Vaccine

A new vaccine has been developed for young women aged 12-25 years to protect against HPV. We provide this at Marie Stopes centres; please ask us for more information.

When will I get my results?

We will send your smear results to your home, usually within two weeks. We can also send a copy to your GP if you wish. Your results will either be:

- Normal
- Unclear/inadequate – could not be viewed and we will need to take another sample
- Abnormal/irregular – changes could be mild, moderate or severe

We understand that receiving test results can be worrying or confusing, so please do contact us at any time if you have any questions or concerns.

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What if my results are irregular?

First of all, do not panic. Any change in the cells of your cervix usually happen very slowly.

We will send a full explanation of what the test results show, and advise you on what to do next.

If your results show cell changes, we may recommend that you have another smear test after a period of time or that you make an appointment for a colposcopy. You can do this through your GP or Marie Stopes International will arrange a private appointment.

What is a colposcopy?

This is the next step in the screening process. A specialist gynaecologist will look at your cervix using a colposcope, which is a bit like a microscope giving a magnified view. If necessary, a tiny sample of tissue will be taken and tested in more detail.

Treatment

Depending on the colposcopy results the gynaecologist will discuss the next step with you. This may take the form of further screening and observation or active treatment. Treatment is usually very successful.

We hope this booklet has helped answer your questions so far. If there is anything that you are unsure about or that is worrying you, please ask.

About Marie Stopes International

Marie Stopes International is a specialist reproductive healthcare organisation and a registered charity, working in both the UK and overseas.

Our nine main UK centres help over 100,000 women and men each year with sexual and reproductive healthcare, contraception and health screening... but the good work does not stop here.

Any financial surplus generated in the UK helps us provide reproductive healthcare services to women and their families in some of the poorest communities in the world.

The organisation campaigns for better awareness of sexual health issues and open access to services for everyone. Our aim is to provide a high quality service, tailored to individual need. Whichever service you require, we offer convenient appointments and experienced teams who are supportive and professional.

Our health screening services....

A Well Woman check at Marie Stopes International includes a cervical smear test and advice on how to be breast aware, as well as other basic checks important to women's health.

Find us in:

Marie Stopes House

108 Whitfield Street, London, W1P 5BE

Marie Stopes South London Centre

1a Raleigh Gardens, London SW2 1AB

Marie Stopes Bristol Centre

3 Great George Street, Bristol, BS1 5RR

Marie Stopes Leeds Centre

45 Barrack Road, Leeds, LS7 4AB

For information and appointments:

Telephone **0845 300 0460** – 24 hours

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