



# **CERVICAL SCREENING AFTER SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND ABUSE**

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# WHAT IS CERVICAL SCREENING

Cervical screening, or smear test, is a test to check the health of the cervix to help prevent cervical cancer. In England, they are offered to women and people with a cervix every three years from the age of 25 until you are 49. After that, you will be invited for screening every five years until age 64.

The cervical cells collected during screening are tested for human papillomavirus (HPV). High-risk HPV can cause cervical cells to become abnormal. If these types of HPV are not found, you will be re-invited for a screening in three years.



If these types of HPV are found, the sample is checked for any changes in the cells of your cervix. These can be treated before they get a chance to turn into cervical cancer.

Around two weeks after your screening, you will receive a letter, and in some cases, also a text message letting you know the outcome of your screening.

## WHERE DO I GO FOR CERVICAL SCREENING?

Cervical screening is usually done by the practice nurse at your GP surgery. However, sexual health clinics may also offer screening.

If you live in England, there is a specialist clinic based in London that you can access for cervical screening. For more information, please visit: [mybodybackproject.com](http://mybodybackproject.com)

# CERVICAL SCREENING AFTER SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

You may have just received a letter for your first cervical screen, have attended screenings regularly, or may have been avoiding them.

Whatever the situation, attending for screening (or even just making an appointment) can be daunting, scary, anxiety-provoking, and triggering following an experience of sexual violence or abuse.

## WHAT MAKES CERVICAL SCREENING CHALLENGING AFTER SEXUAL VIOLENCE?

Although we understand why screening is necessary and may even want to attend, often our bodies can't always differentiate between the screening and the assault/s we experienced.

This means the screening could feel painful or overwhelming. Our brains may cope with it similarly as they did at the time of the assaults/s by freezing, feeling as though we need to run away, wanting to fight, or flopping.

When we are in danger, our brain tells our bodies to react a certain way. The brain does this automatically and sends a signal to our body to respond in a way that keeps us safe. You may have heard of fight or flight, but the reactions of freeze, flop, and friend are also automatic reactions that we can experience in the moment.

**We do not choose what reaction/s we have; they happen automatically to protect us from further harm and help us survive.**

- **Flight:** We may respond by physically fighting, pushing, struggling, or saying no.
- **Fight:** We may run, hide, or back away.
- **Freeze:** We may go tense, still silent and unable to move. **FREEZING IS NOT GIVING CONSENT.**
- **Flop:** This is similar to freezing, but you might feel floppy. This automatic response helps reduce any physical pain.

- **Friend:** Calling for help, shouting, or even trying to make friends with the attacker by negotiating or pleading.

**For us, cervical screening also involves a lot of additional challenges. Lying on our backs, undressing, and the position we are asked to lie in can all make us feel vulnerable or may even be triggering.**

Although we logically know it is a speculum that is being put in our vagina, our brain and bodies may think it is something different. It may feel that aspects of the assault are happening again.

For some, the fact that it is a medical procedure undertaken in a clinical environment that is often bright and noisy can be difficult.

Cervical screening is a part of our self-care for our health, but it is important that we find ways to have it done that don't make us feel unsafe. If in doubt, you can always ask to stop and try again another time.

*“After I was attacked, I avoided screening for years. I would throw away invitation letters and delete texts from the GP. Each time I got a reminder letter through, I wanted to cry”*

It is important to know that you can ask your doctor to take your name off the cervical screening automatic invitation list until such a time you feel more able to attend. Doing this will stop you from receiving invites and reminder letters.

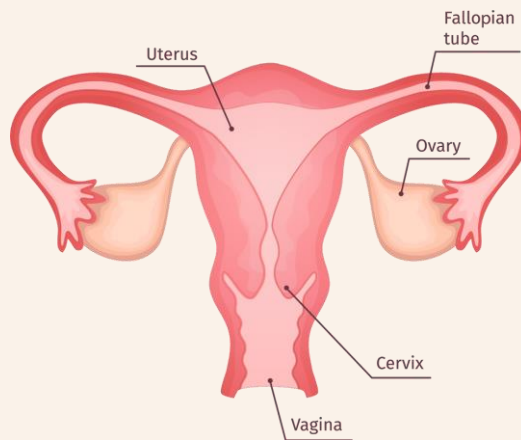
Please be aware that you may be asked why you want your name removed.



# WHAT HAPPENS DURING THE SCREENING

Cells need to be collected from the cervix to undertake the screening.

The cervix is the lowest part of the womb and is at the top of the vagina.



- 1.** To perform the screening and have access to the top of the vagina, you will be asked to undress from the waist down, and lie on an examination couch. You will be provided with a sheet, blanket, or paper roll to cover yourself.
- 2.** Your vagina needs to be opened. This is done by gently inserting a plastic cylinder called a speculum. The speculum has a round end and comes in different sizes. The speculum is coated in lubricant before insertion.
- 3.** When the speculum has been inserted into the vagina and reaches the entrance to the cervix, the speculum will be opened. Doing this opens up your vaginal canal to allow the entrance of the cervix to be seen. The speculum is opened about 1-2 inches.
- 4.** Cervical cells are collected using a small brush inserted through the speculum and gently into your cervix. This can feel strange or 'tickly' but lasts a few seconds. The brush and speculum will then be removed, and you will be left to dress.

# PREPARING FOR THE APPOINTMENT AND WHEN YOU ARE THERE

The previous section describes the steps involved in cervical screening. However, we are aware that any step or combination of steps in this process has the potential to cause difficulties.

The following pages provide suggestions as to what you can try and request when you are preparing to make the appointment, and when you are there to make the process as manageable as possible.

Feeling that you are not in control of your cervical screening appointment may remind you of past experiences. Making decisions about how you would like the appointment to go may help you feel more in control and have a positive experience.

## MAKING AND PREPARING FOR THE APPOINTMENT

- Don't underestimate how difficult it can be to decide to attend for screening and to make an appointment.
- You might be nervous when you call. If it helps, note of what you want to say and ask for.
- It is usually the practice nurse that does the screening, so ask to make an appointment with them. Asking for an appointment at the end of the clinic may be a good time as you know that nobody will be waiting after you, and it is OK if the appointment takes a little longer. You could also ask for a double appointment so you know you can take the appointment slowly at your own pace.
- Consider making an appointment, not for the screening itself, but to meet with the nurse to talk through the procedure and see the speculum and brush.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR MANAGING DIFFICULT FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

As the appointment date gets closer, you may be feeling anxious and nervous or have noticed an increase or re-emergence of flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, and nightmares.

Appointments such as those for cervical screening can be anxiety-provoking for anybody as they are intimate and can be uncomfortable. However, for those of us who have experienced sexual violence and abuse, they can cause additional anxiety.

In addition, appointments, especially for something like cervical screening, can cause an increase or re-emergence of intense thoughts or memories associated with our experience. If there is anything that you do to help you manage these feelings, it might be a good idea to use them in the days leading up to the appointment.



If you are unsure what helps you manage difficult feelings or you are looking for more suggestions, we have offered some below. Some of these can be used during the screening itself.

## GROUNDING TECHNIQUES

Grounding is a set of skills that help you separate what was happening then from what is happening now. When your thoughts and feelings are too intense, grounding can give you a safe way to feel more in control of your thoughts and feelings. Grounding can also allow you to balance between feeling emotions too much or too little.

Grounding is useful when you:

**Feel upset**

**Have a flashback.**

**Have had a nightmare.**

One of the main goals of grounding is to focus on the things around you and switch the focus from yourself and your memories. Doing this lets your brain know you are no longer in danger and are safe.



## THE 5-4-3-2-1 GROUNDING TECHNIQUE

1. Look around and name **five** things that you can see around you. Think about the colours and shapes of what you are looking at. What do you like about it? What don't you like about it?
2. Focus on **four** things that you can feel. Think about how they feel; are they soft or hard? Smooth or rough? Cold or warm?
3. Name **three** things that you can hear around you. Think about how loud or quiet the noises are. Are they noises you hear often?
4. Notice **two** things that you can smell around you right now. Think about what you like about that smell.
5. Focus on **one** thing that you can taste. If you can't taste anything, then instead, you can choose your favourite thing to take with you to the appointment to taste.

## GOING TO THE SUPERMARKET

1. Choose a letter of the alphabet (for example, 'C').
2. Imagine you are in a supermarket, and have to find ten items beginning with the letter 'C' to put in your basket. (cat litter, carrots, cucumber, cheese, etc.).
3. Repeat with different letters of the alphabet.

## BREATHING EXERCISES

When we are anxious, we may breathe too quickly and take in too much air. This, or hyperventilating, causes the same bodily reactions as fear. For our bodies to feel safe, we need to take in a little less air. One way of doing this is to slow down and space out our breaths.

We have listed below two breathing exercises that we find helpful.

### CALMMMMMMMM

A long exhale can help lower the body's stress response, which we might feel in situations such as cervical screening.

1. Take a slow, regular breath in through your nose with your mouth closed and breathe out slowly, saying 'calmmmm' and pause for 2, 3, or 4 counts.

2. Repeat

### BELLY BREATHING

1. Place one hand on your stomach and another on your chest. Imagine that there is a balloon in your stomach that you are filling up (by pushing your hand away from your stomach) and then deflating (by your hand coming back down).

2. Breathe in through your nose for a slow count of two. You should feel your stomach rise.

3. Breathe out slowly over a count of three. The balloon should deflate, and your hand comes down.

## DISCLOSING YOUR EXPERIENCE

Talking about an experience of sexual violence can be very difficult; you may have never disclosed or may also deny it if asked. All of these feelings and reactions are normal.

No pressure should be placed on you to disclose anything during your appointment. However, let the person you are seeing know how you are feeling. If they are aware, it may help them better understand how to help you and work with you during the appointment so you have a positive experience.

## WONDERING WHAT TO SAY?

Not sure what you could say? People may start the conversation in different ways. Here are some ideas that may help:

- You might start by saying, "I feel anxious when I come to the doctors."
- You could say a few words about what worries you: being touched, needing to undress, having a screening, etc.
- You can choose how much to explain. "I've experienced sexual assault. I'd rather not talk about the details, though."
- You can keep it vague: "These are difficult for me because of my history."
- You can share any ideas about how to make a screening or any medical examination more comfortable and helpful, by saying, "It might help if you explain the steps before doing them". "Are you Ok to go slowly, stop for a break, or even stop the exam if I start feeling overwhelmed?"



## TIPS FOR MANAGING THE SCREENING



We have spoken about how it is normal to be anxious and unsettled when attending a cervical screening appointment or to avoid it altogether. It is a procedure that, although relatively quick, can cause those of us with traumatic experiences, discomfort, distress, and even a worsening or re-emergence of nightmares and flashbacks.

To accompany the information on preparing, we have compiled a list of things that have helped us before and at the time of the appointment.

These can be added to the support page at the end of this document, which you can take to your appointment.

### BEFORE THE APPOINTMENT

- Practice grounding and breathing techniques so that they feel familiar if you do need to use them.
- Wear a dress or skirt to the appointment so you can just pull it up.
- You can ask for the smallest speculum or ask if you can insert it yourself.
- Bring a blanket to cover yourself (tissue roll can be quite small!).
- Bring music or audiobooks to listen to or fiddle toys if these are helpful.
- Bring someone you trust with you for support.
- You can ask if you can do a home test for the HPV virus first before proceeding with the full smear test at the GP surgery because if you do not have the HPV virus, they do not need to check your cervix.
- Tell yourself that you are going for a screening before going. This helps your brain and body feel safer, which helps us to notice if we are going into a trauma response.

- If you are worried about stress responses kicking in, coping with them, or what the nurse might think, it may be a good idea to let your nurse know before the test. For example, you can tell them, “I might cry” or “I might not be able to answer you.” You do not have to explain why you might react this way.
- Book an appointment to discuss the screening, learn more about what happens, and see the speculum and brush. You do not have to have the test at this appointment.
- Ask to be seen by a trusted doctor or nurse with whom you already have a good relationship. While they may not be fully aware of your situation, it may make the appointment feel more comfortable.

*“I asked that the nurse pause at every stage and let me know what she would do next. For example, she inserted the speculum just a little, then stopped until I said she could put it fully in. This helped me feel in control, and my brain knew that it was a speculum in me, and nothing else”*



## DURING THE APPOINTMENT

- If you find lying flat difficult, ask for a pillow or to sit up slightly.
- If lying on your back in the required position is difficult, you can ask to lie on your side with your knees brought up to your chest.
- Ask for blinds to be closed, the curtain around the examination table pulled round, and the door locked (if possible).
- If clinical spaces are triggering, ask for overhead lighting to be turned off.
- The procedure can be uncomfortable if you are tense as pelvic floor muscles tighten - remember to breathe!
- Ask to feel the speculum on your inner thigh before they insert it so your brain recognises it for what it is.
- Ask to be told what will happen before it is done.
- Say that you may need to pause between each step.
- Consider a pre-arranged way of letting the person know you want to stop or pause. This is important if you tend to freeze, which makes you unable to speak.
- Tell the person doing the screening of any words or phrases you prefer or are not comfortable with. This will help them avoid any language or words that may be distressing. E.g., 'Relax,' 'Lie still and it will soon be over.'
- Tell them how heavy or light their touch should be, or not to touch certain areas of your body if possible.
- It is OK to ask them to stop and try again another day; the worst thing to do is force your body to go through it in silence.
- Plan what you are going to do after the appointment. You may need time to ground yourself.

## SUPPORT PLAN

We have added this as some of us have found it helpful to take something written to an appointment that explains why and what may be difficult and what can be done to help us better manage the appointment and have a positive experience.

We have found this especially useful for procedures such as cervical screenings, which you attend infrequently and, by their nature, can be distressing and triggering.

It is also helpful if you are anxious, which may make talking difficult, or you need the healthcare professional to know some information but you don't want to disclose.

You can copy this, amend it with the tips from the previous pages, or print it out.

I would like you to know I have had previous experiences that may make this procedure difficult for me.

To help me have a positive experience, and for you to help me the best that you can throughout the procedure, please keep the following in mind:

I am feeling.....

I am worried about.....

It would be helpful for me if you could.....

Please could you not.....

*This information has been written by members of the Kick Back group, which is affiliated with the East Kent Rape Crisis Centre. We are a group of women who have experienced different forms of sexual violence and abuse. We have drawn on our experience/s to create a range of information booklets in the hope that those who are looking for and needing information can be assured that what we have written comes from a place of experience.*

*If you would like to use your experience to help us develop additional resources or to share your experience in another way, please email [serviceuserconsultationgroup@ekrcc.org.uk](mailto:serviceuserconsultationgroup@ekrcc.org.uk)*

**We wish you all the best for your screening x**

