

Benenden Hospital expert answers the most common questions about smear tests

Cervical Screening Awareness week runs from 20 to 26 June. The week aims to highlight the importance of regular cervical screening as well as to provide information and reassurance around any fears or embarrassment that women may have concerns taking the test.

[Cervical cancer](#) is the most common form of cancer in women under 35 with two women in the UK per day dying from the disease. Regular cervical screening appointments can prevent up to 75% of instances of cervical cancer, saving 2,000 lives per year. Despite this, many women are reluctant to have this test done with a quarter of women not responding to their screening invitation. Cervical Screening Awareness Week is organised by the charity [Jo's Cervical Cancer trust](#), a charity dedicated to women affected by cervical cancer or abnormalities.

[Rowan Connell, Consultant Gynaecologist and Medical Director](#) at Benenden Hospital, answers the eight most common questions around smear tests.

Rowan Connell said: "It is important that women attend their cervical screening test (also known as smear test). It is one of the best ways to protect yourself from cervical cancer, although it is a test for cancer, it's more importantly a test to help prevent cancer, by picking up early signs of pre-cancer most tests are now also looking for HPV a common virus which can increase the risks. Regular screening will help monitor any abnormal cells. The smear test takes less than five minutes, with the whole appointment taking less than 10 minutes."

1. How long do I have to wait for my smear test results?

The results from your smear test should be ready and sent to you in the post within two weeks.

If you test negative for the types of HPV known to cause changes in your cervix, no further tests are needed, and you will be asked to come for your next cervix screen in 3-5 years, depending on your age.

However, if you do test positive for HPV, your sample will be tested for changes in your cells. If changes aren't found, you will be invited back for another smear test in a year. If changes in cells are found, you will be sent for a colposcopy which is a minimally invasive procedure, and this will further examine your cervix and potentially remove abnormal cells.

2. Can I have a smear test when I'm pregnant?

You shouldn't have a smear test when pregnant as the pregnancy can interfere with the test

results. If you have a smear test scheduled whilst you are pregnant, you will need to reschedule it. It is recommended to wait until at least 12 weeks after giving birth before having your smear test.

3. Can I have sex before a smear test?

It is recommended that you avoid sex for 24 hours before you have your smear test. Sex can cause the cells that line with your cervix, which are collected during your smear test, to become irritated and inflamed. This can interfere with your test results. Vaginal discharge that is produced during sex can also interfere with your test results.

4. Does a smear test hurt?

For most women, a smear test is not painful. When the speculum is inserted into the vagina, it might feel a little uncomfortable, but it shouldn't hurt. When the cells are collected from the lining of the cervix with a soft brush, it might feel strange, but shouldn't cause any discomfort.

If at any point, you feel pain or discomfort, you can ask your doctor or nurse performing your smear test to stop and take a break.

5. Can I have a smear test on my period?

Like having sex, it isn't possible to have a smear test during your period as the blood cells can interfere with the effectiveness of the test. If you think your smear test is at the same time as your period, you can rearrange the appointment. It is recommended you avoid having a smear test during, two days before, and two days after your period.

6. Can I request to have an earlier smear test before the age of 25?

On the NHS, you can't request an early smear test. However, you can request an early smear test privately with Benenden Hospital.

NHS smear tests are part of the [national cervical screening programme](#) and are only available every three or five years between the ages of 25 and 64. You will be invited to have a smear test sooner than three years after your last smear test if you tested positive for [human papillomavirus \(HPV\)](#) previously, but no changes were detected in the cells collected.

7. What happens in a smear test?

Before your smear test, you will be asked to remove all clothing from the waist down and lie on your back on an examination bed or couch.

The health professional (whether that's a doctor or nurse), will insert a smooth, tube-shaped tool called a speculum into your vagina to help open it up. Next, a soft brush will be inserted through the speculum to reach your cervix, where it will be rotated to collect a sample of the cells lining your cervix. These cells will be sent to a lab where they will be tested for certain types of human papillomavirus (HPV) that can cause changes in the cervix, which lead to cancer. If any of those HPV types are detected, the cervix will be assessed for precancerous changes.

Once your smear test is complete, which should take around five minutes, you can get dressed and return to your usual activities. You may notice some spotting or light bleeding for a few hours after your test, this is normal.

8. What are the main dos and don'ts before a smear test?

If you have never had a smear test or feel anxious about having a smear test, you can take someone with you for moral support. Don't keep your anxiety to yourself, let the health professional performing your smear test know that you are nervous. You will be asked to remove all clothing from the waist down and will be given a sheet to cover yourself with. You may, therefore, want to wear clothing that you won't have to remove, such as a dress or skirt that you can lift up.

During your test, you can try deep breathing exercises to help keep you calm and/or listen to music. The test itself should take no more than five minutes but if you feel uncomfortable at any point, you can ask them to stop. After your test, you may want to wear a pantyliner as you may experience some spotting or light bleeding for a few hours afterward, but this is completely normal.

Private GP services at Benenden Hospital

Health concerns can be worrying. Our male and female GPs can discuss any concerns you have about your health. You'll have a 25-minute face-to-face appointment to thoroughly discuss your health concerns. They will also arrange any tests, scans or follow-up appointments with you.

Kate needed access to a Private GP as she had a medical deadline on my smear test results for the military. Listen to [Kate's experience](#) using our private GP service in Kent, getting the fast and professional service she needed.

To book an appointment, fill in our [online booking form](#) or contact our Private Patients Team on **01580 363168**.

Notes to Editor

For further information or to arrange an interview with Rowan Connell, Medical Director, MRCOG, please contact Mirella Falcone, PR & Communications Manager at Benenden Hospital, via email on mirella.falcone@benenden.org.uk

Founded in 1907, Benenden Hospital is an independent hospital with charitable status, which continues the principle of providing first-class treatment for a wide range of specialities.

Rated as Outstanding by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), the hospital offers a wide range of healthcare consultations, treatments and diagnostic services to Self-Pay patients, Benenden Health members and those with private health insurance. Some services may also be available to NHS patients via the e-referral system.