Barriers to cervical screening among 25-29 year olds

With cervical screening (smear test) uptake falling year on year, and one in three young women who are invited to their first cervical screening not taking up their invitation, we wanted to find out more about why these women don’t attend and what they know about the test.

Total sample size was 3,002 women aged 25 – 29. Fieldwork was undertaken by Censuswide between 27 October – 03 November 2016. The survey was carried out online.

Cervical screening provides the best protection against cervical cancer as it can prevent up to 75% of all cervical cancer from developing. It is estimated that the NHS cervical screening programme saves around 5,000 lives a year. However, in England cervical screening is currently at a 19 year low with only 72.7% of women attending their screening in 2015/16. Uptake drops even lower among 25-29 olds of which only 63.3% attended equating to almost a quarter of a million young women not taking up their invitation in England.

Key findings include:

- Over a quarter (26.7%) are too embarrassed to attend cervical screening
- Over two thirds (70%) don’t think cervical screenings reduce a woman’s risk of cervical cancer
- 72% of the 25-29 year olds surveyed do not feel comfortable getting undressed in front of doctors or nurses however in stark contrast just under one in ten (8.4%) would consider surgery to alter the way their genitals look
- Over half (51%) of the women surveyed reported delaying or not attending screening with almost one quarter (24%) admitting they have delayed for over one year and almost one in ten (9%) having never attended the test
- Reasons for not attending include simply putting it off (33%), worrying it would be embarrassing (27%), or worrying it would be painful (25%).

The results of the survey were published during 2017’s Cervical Cancer Prevention Week (22-28 January) to launch our #SmearForSmear campaign for the third year. The campaign aims to tackle many of the barriers highlighted in the survey including embarrassment in talking about and to educate women about the role of the test in preventing cervical cancer.

Read the press release on the survey
What do you think cervical screening (smear test) is? (Tick all that apply)

- A test to find cervical cancer: 74.0%
- A test to find pre-cancerous abnormalities: 46.3%
- A test to check the health of the womb: 30.7%
- A test to find ovarian cancer: 23.2%
- A test for human papillomavirus (HPV): 20.2%
- A test for sexually transmitted diseases: 8.6%
- A test for chlamydia: 5.8%
- Don't know: 1.9%
- Other, please specify: 0.1%

Have you ever delayed your cervical screening (smear test)?

- Yes, I have never attended cervical screening: 17.7%
- Yes, I have delayed attending: 33.3%
- No, I have never delayed attending: 44.3%
- N/A I have never been invited to a cervical screening (smear test): 4.7%
How much time passed between receiving your invitation letter and attending your cervical screening (smear test)?

- Less than 3 months: 42.2%
- 3 - 6 months: 20.5%
- 7 - 11 months: 10.2%
- 1 - 2 years: 11.3%
- 3 - 4 years: 3.3%
- Longer than 4 years, please specify in years: 0.5%
- Unsure: 2.8%
- N/A I have never attended cervical screening (smear test): 9.2%

What has caused you to delay or not attend cervical screening (smear test)? (Tick all that apply)

- I kept putting it off: 32.9%
- I was worried it would be embarrassing: 26.7%
- I was worried it would be painful: 25.7%
- I feel uncomfortable taking my clothes off in front of a stranger: 24.3%
- I don’t want to be naked in front of other people: 20.6%
- I forgot all about it: 16.4%
- I’m not comfortable with how my body looks: 16.2%
- I found it hard to book an appointment at a convenient time: 14.5%
- I was worried about what the results would say: 14.2%
- I’m not comfortable with how my genitals look: 13.3%
- Other reason (please specify): 11.5%
- I worry that I have to get undressed in front of a male: 11.3%
- I couldn’t get time off work: 8.4%
- I presumed that nothing was wrong with me: 7.2%
- I have had a previous bad experience when attending screening: 5.9%
- I am not comfortable discussing my sexual history / sexuality: 5.6%
- I would prefer not to know if there was something wrong: 5.2%
- I have not had sex recently so don’t need to: 5.1%
- I have found it hard to arrange childcare: 5.0%
- I don’t think it is important / relevant to me: 3.8%
- Cervical cancer is important for women of my age: 3.0%
- Cervical cancer is rare in women of my ethnicity: 1.9%
- I am a lesbian and so don’t need to go: 1.3%
- Cervical screening is frowned upon in my culture/ community: 1.1%
Where would you prefer to have your cervical screening (smear test) appointment? Please rank in order of preference, where your most preferred choice is ranked at the top, and your least preferred choice is ranked at the bottom.

Don't mind

Making an appointment at the GP practice I am registered with

Making an appointment at a GP practice of my choice eg. one close to work

A walk in appointment at a sexual health clinic

Making an appointment at a sexual health clinic

Would you like to be offered the opportunity to take your own sample at home and send it off to be tested instead of going to your GP?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I openly discuss cervical screening (smear test) with my friends</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I openly discuss cervical screening (smear test) with family</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find talking about gynaecological health embarrassing</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I encourage other women to take up their cervical screening (smear test) invitation</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I have sought advice/support in the past about my cervical screening (smear test)</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find talking about cervical screening (smear test) intrusive</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find talking about cervical screening (smear test) embarrassing</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't discuss cervical screening (smear test) because I'm not interested in discussing this aspect of my health</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would not seek advice/support if I were worried about my cervical screening (smear test)</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel comfortable discussing contraception with my friends</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been tested for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in the past</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I was tested for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) after I last changed sexual partners</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
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</table>
Thinking about the last time you attended cervical screening test (smear test), to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- I felt at ease during the procedure: Agree 23.6%, Neither agree nor disagree 23.5%, Disagree 52.9%
- I found the procedure painful: Agree 39.0%, Neither agree nor disagree 36.3%, Disagree 26.7%
- I found the procedure embarrassing: Agree 29.4%, Neither agree nor disagree 42.3%, Disagree 28.2%
- I was aware I could bring someone with me to the appointment: Agree 41.5%, Neither agree nor disagree 35.6%, Disagree 22.9%
- I was aware I could request a female medical practitioner: Agree 64.8%, Neither agree nor disagree 18.0%, Disagree 17.1%
- I was aware I could ask for a smaller speculum: Agree 62.0%, Neither agree nor disagree 20.3%, Disagree 17.8%
- Before attending I fully understood what the procedure involved: Agree 66.1%, Neither agree nor disagree 18.9%, Disagree 15.0%
- On arrival at the appointment the medical practitioner carrying out the test explained what would happen during the procedure: Agree 75.9%, Neither agree nor disagree 16.8%, Disagree 7.3%
It was explained to me why it’s important to attend cervical screening

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt discomfort during the procedure but it was not painful</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>59.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt no discomfort or pain during the procedure</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>49.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I felt at ease with the medical practitioner who performed the screening</td>
<td></td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the procedure it was explained how and when I would receive the results</td>
<td>62.8%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was explained to me what the results of the test would mean</td>
<td></td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The medical practitioner talked me through the procedure steps as they were doing it to ensure I knew what was coming</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The medical practitioner locked the door to the room</td>
<td></td>
<td>39.9%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Thinking about the last time you attended cervical screening (smear test), to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

0.0% 10.0% 20.0% 30.0% 40.0% 50.0% 60.0% 70.0% 80.0% 90.0%

- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
What do you think are the risk factors for developing cervical cancer?  
(Tick all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factor</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family history of cervical cancer</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infection with human papillomavirus (HPV)</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unprotected sex</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>High number of sexual partners</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not attending cervical screening (smear test)</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading an unhealthy lifestyle</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being overweight</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early sexual activity</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A poor immune system</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having children at a young age</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The contraceptive pill</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being underweight</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having children at an older age</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>What would encourage you to attend cervical screening (smear test)?</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Tick all that apply)</td>
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<tr>
<td>More flexible GP surgery opening hours (eg. late evenings,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>weekends)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being able to book an appointment online</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friends reassuring you about the procedure</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Being able to self-sample in my own home</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowing someone with experience of cervical cancer or cervical</td>
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<tr>
<td>abnormalities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Being sent a reminder by text</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Being sent an appointment time with my invitation letter</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Family members reassuring you about the procedure</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>If I felt like there was something wrong with me</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Being able to book an appointment at any GP surgery eg close</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>to my work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Posters in your GP surgery</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Being able to get tested in a sexual health clinic</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A celebrity/blogger/vlogger talking about cervical screening</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nothing would encourage me to attend cervical screening</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Adverts on TV/Spotify/YouTube</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>If childcare was offered</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Images on leaflets relating to your ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

- More flexible GP surgery opening hours: 41.3%
- Being able to book an appointment online: 36.9%
- Friends reassuring you about the procedure: 35.1%
- Being able to self-sample in my own home: 33.5%
- Knowing someone with experience of cervical cancer or cervical abnormalities: 30.6%
- Being sent a reminder by text: 28.7%
- Being sent an appointment time with my invitation letter: 28.3%
- Family members reassuring you about the procedure: 25.5%
- If I felt like there was something wrong with me: 22.1%
- Being able to book an appointment at any GP surgery eg close to my work: 15.9%
- Posters in your GP surgery: 13.0%
- Being able to get tested in a sexual health clinic: 12.8%
- A celebrity/blogger/vlogger talking about cervical screening: 7.5%
- Nothing would encourage me to attend cervical screening: 7.2%
- Adverts on TV/Spotify/YouTube: 6.5%
- If childcare was offered: 4.6%
- Images on leaflets relating to your ethnicity: 3.3%
- Other (please specify): 2.3%
Who or what would you go to for advice and reassurance about cervical screening (smear tests)? (Tick all that apply)

- Mother: 52.2%
- Friend: 44.5%
- Doctor: 41.4%
- The internet/online community/online forum: 23.6%
- Partner: 20.6%
- Sister: 19.3%
- Other family member: 8.5%
- There isn’t anyone/anywhere I would go to for advice and reassurance: 8.2%
- Colleague: 7.1%
- Sibling: 5.5%
- Grandmother: 5.3%
- A charity: 3.4%
- Magazine: 2.0%
- Other, please specify: 0.7%
Which of the following statements do you agree with? (Tick all that apply)

- I'm happy with how my body looks: 33.8%
- I'm happy with how my genitals look: 31.1%
- None of the above: 29.4%
- I feel comfortable getting undressed and changed in front of a doctor/nurse: 27.7%
- I have been for a bikini wax or would consider going for a bikini wax: 27.1%
- I feel comfortable getting undressed and changed in front of friends: 25.0%
- I feel comfortable getting undressed in front of other women eg at the swimming pool or gym: 21.8%
- I would consider getting labiaplasty (cosmetic surgery on female genitals): 8.4%

Which of the following do you feel there is social/peer pressure to do? (Tick all that apply)

- Lose weight/be a certain weight: 65.2%
- To look good: 64.5%
- Wear makeup: 50.9%
- To take care of my body: 45.2%
- To eat healthily: 43.3%
- To portray myself well on social media: 42.7%
- Go for a bikini wax: 24.8%
- To be aware of cancer symptoms: 12.4%
- None of the above: 10.0%
- Attend cervical screening (smear test): 10.0%
Have you received the HPV vaccination?

- Yes: 18.3%
- No: 56.7%
- Not sure: 25.0%

Which of the following do you think the HPV vaccination protects you against? (Tick all that apply)

- Human papillomavirus (HPV): 53.7%
- Cervical cancer: 26.6%
- Don’t know: 24.6%
- Ovarian cancer: 12.9%
- Genital warts: 4.5%
- Vulva cancer: 3.4%
- Sexually Transmitted Infections: 3.1%
- HIV: 3.0%
- All gynaecological cancers: 2.5%
- Chlamydia: 2.1%
- None of the above: 1.3%

Which of the following statements do you agree with? (Tick all that apply)

- All women should attend cervical screening (smear test) when invited regardless of whether they have had the HPV vaccination: 70.4%
- There is no relationship between the HPV vaccination and cervical screening (smear test): 17.8%
- None of the above: 12.6%
- It is less important to attend cervical screening (smear test) if you have had the HPV vaccination: 6.8%
- Cervical screening (smear test) is only for women who have not had the HPV vaccination: 4.4%
- It is not important to attend cervical screening (smear test) if you have had the HPV vaccination: 4.2%
Which, if any, of the following do you think are symptoms of cervical cancer? (Tick all that apply)

- Bleeding outside of your periods: 51.3%
- Bleeding after or during sexual intercourse: 49.9%
- Unusual and/or unpleasant vaginal discharge: 49.7%
- Discomfort or pain during sex: 46.4%
- Persistent abdominal cramps: 39.9%
- Vaginal pain: 39.3%
- Pain when urinating: 31.0%
- Irregular or non-existent periods: 29.5%
- Rapid weight loss: 25.4%
- Don’t know: 24.1%
- Lower back pain: 23.7%
- Persistent bloating or increased stomach size: 23.0%
- Post-menopausal bleeding: 18.8%
- Difficulty eating or feeling full quickly: 13.8%
- Blood in poo: 13.7%
- None of the above: 1.3%