Further understanding of the perception of cervical screening among women over 50

Annual statistics show incidences of cervical cancer in the UK have risen from 8 diagnoses every day to 9 each day meaning 3,224 women faced a diagnosis in 2014. Adding to concern, new modelling work commissioned by Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust in 2016 uncovered a ticking time bomb: incidences of cervical cancer are set to rocket if current uptake of cervical screening remains the same. By 2040 incidences will have increased by 16% among 60-64 year olds and 85% among 70-74 year olds. A 100% increase in mortality among 60-64 year olds is also a very real threat rising to a massive 117% if screening uptake continues to decline and falls by another 5%.

In April 2016 we undertook a survey of women aged 50 and over as part of our Eradicate Cervical Cancer campaign. We wanted to further explore their knowledge of cervical cancer and barriers to cervical screening. The results were launched during Cervical Screening Awareness Week 2016.

We partnered with Gransnet, the busiest social networking site for the over 50s, to survey their users. Total sample size was 1020 women aged 50 and over. Fieldwork was undertaken between 18 April - 11 May 2016. The survey was carried out online.

Key findings include:

- One in three (33%) reported delaying cervical screening
- 32% do not think cervical screening is part of the healthy upkeep of a woman’s body
- On average women over 50 delay their cervical screening for 26 months and 1 in 10 (10%) delay for over 5 years
- 46% do not agree or do not know that human papillomavirus (HPV) is common
- 21% do not agree or do not know that regular cervical screening reduces the risk of cervical cancer

The survey revealed relevance, accessibility and flexibility to be significant barriers to cervical screening among this group. For women who are post-menopause, screening can be also particularly uncomfortable which is why we now call for further research into HPV self-sampling tests as it could help overcome some of the barriers for this age group.
For those who have never been for cervical screening only 54% agreed that “it’s a necessary health test for all women”, 46% agreed that “it’s important to have regularly” and 8% agreed that “it’s a waste of time”.

Which, if any, of the following statements about cervical screening (smear tests) do you agree with? (choose as many as apply)

- It’s a necessary health test for all women: 81%
- It’s really important to have regularly: 78%
- It’s part of the healthy upkeep of a woman’s body: 68%
- It’s free, why wouldn’t I take advantage of it?: 57%
- It’s not relevant to women of my age: 3%
- It is an unnecessary procedure: 1%
- It is not necessary if you’ve been with the same partner for over 5 years: 1%
- It’s a waste of time: 1%
- It’s an unnecessary test for women over 50: 1%
Thinking about the last time you attended a cervical screening (smear test), please tell us to what extent you agree with the following statements.

- **I felt no discomfort or pain during the procedure**: 55% Agree, 33% Disagree, 10% Neither agree nor disagree, 0% Don't know
- **I felt discomfort during the procedure but it was not painful**: 59% Agree, 31% Disagree, 6% Neither agree nor disagree, 0% Don't know
- **I felt mild pain**: 54% Agree, 27% Disagree, 13% Neither agree nor disagree, 1% Don't know
- **I felt moderate pain**: 71% Agree, 11% Disagree, 10% Neither agree nor disagree, 1% Don't know
- **I felt severe pain**: 76% Agree, 9% Disagree, 7% Neither agree nor disagree, 1% Don't know
- **I found the procedure embarrassing**: 41% Agree, 38% Neither disagree, 18% Disagree, 3% Don't know
- **Before the procedure the medical practitioner carrying out the test explained what would happen during the procedure**: 69% Agree, 15% Neither agree nor disagree, 11% Disagree, 3% Don't know
- **I felt at ease with the medical practitioner who performed the screening**: 76% Agree, 11% Neither agree nor disagree, 10% Disagree, 1% Don't know
- **After the procedure it was explained how and when I would receive the results**: 83% Agree, 5% Neither disagree, 7% Disagree, 2% Don't know
- **It was explained to me what the results of the test would mean**: 55% Agree, 23% Neither disagree, 16% Disagree, 4% Don't know
- **The nurse told me she was unable to find my cervix**: 61% Agree, 11% Neither agree nor disagree, 11% Disagree, 5% Don't know
- **It was a traumatic experience**: 62% Agree, 15% Neither disagree, 11% Disagree, 7% Don't know
- **I have never attended screening**: 54% Agree, 15% Neither agree nor disagree, 11% Disagree, 8% Don't know
- **None of the above**: 0% Agree, 0% Neither agree nor disagree, 0% Disagree, 0% Don't know
Of the respondents who reported always attending their screening, 83% agreed that they felt at ease with the medical practitioner who performed the screening, whereas of those who have previously delayed attending only 64% agreed. Furthermore, of those who have previously delayed their screening, 27% agreed that their cervical screening was a traumatic experience, compared to only 10% of those who have always attended their screening as soon as possible.

Of those who have never attended cervical screening 8% said that it is frowned upon in their culture/community, compared to 0% of those that have always attended screening as soon as possible.

### Have you ever not attended a cervical screening (smear test) or delayed responding to a screening invitation?

- **No, I always attend as soon as possible after receiving my invitation**: 67%
- **Yes, I've delayed but have been for a cervical screening test**: 32%
- **Yes, I have never been for a cervical screening**: 1%

### If you have ever delayed a cervical screening (smear test), what is the longest you've delayed this for?

- **Up to 3 months**: 26%
- **3-6 months**: 16%
- **6 months - 1 year**: 17%
- **1-2 years**: 9%
- **2-3 years**: 8%
- **3-4 years**: 4%
- **4-5 years**: 5%
- **5-10 years**: 5%
- **Over 10 years**: 4%
- **I can't recall**: 7%
Within the “other reason” section, frequent answers including being peri-menopausal and experiencing irregular bleeding which made it difficult to arrange an appointment, or being busy and forgetting or putting off the appointment.
Within the “other” section women said they would be more likely to act on an invitation if they knew that the test is being carried out by a female expert familiar with reasons why it might be painful and hence able to reassure patients.
Cervical cancer is unrelated to age

Which age group do you think is most likely to develop cervical cancer in the UK?

- A woman aged 20-29: 6%
- A woman aged 30-39: 16%
- A woman aged 40-49: 15%
- A woman aged 50-59: 9%
- A woman aged 60-69: 3%
- A woman aged 70+: 1%

The following may or may not increase a woman's chance of developing cervical cancer. To what extent do you agree that each of these can increase a woman's chance of developing cervical cancer?

- Infection with HPV: 2% Agree, 17% Neither agree nor disagree, 81% Disagree
- Smoking: 6% Agree, 32% Neither agree nor disagree, 62% Disagree
- Having a weakened immune system (e.g., because of HIV/AIDS, immunosuppressant drugs or having a transplant): 5% Agree, 32% Neither agree nor disagree, 64% Disagree
- Long term use of the contraceptive pill: 16% Agree, 35% Neither agree nor disagree, 49% Disagree
- Infection with Chlamydia (a sexually transmitted infection): 7% Agree, 35% Neither agree nor disagree, 58% Disagree
- Having a sexual partner who is not circumcised: 18% Agree, 39% Neither agree nor disagree, 44% Disagree
- Starting to have sex at a young age (before age 17): 12% Agree, 27% Neither agree nor disagree, 62% Disagree
- Having many sexual partners: 8% Agree, 18% Neither agree nor disagree, 74% Disagree
- Having many children: 8% Agree, 43% Neither agree nor disagree, 50% Disagree
- Having a sexual partner with many previous partners: 12% Agree, 30% Neither agree nor disagree, 58% Disagree
- Not going for regular smear tests: 10% Agree, 21% Neither agree nor disagree, 69% Disagree
The Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the cause of 99.7% of cervical cancers. It is transmitted through skin to skin contact of the genital area. To what extent do you agree with the following?

- Younger women (under 35) are more likely to get HPV
- Older women (above 50) are more likely to get HPV
- If a woman uses condoms during sex she is at a lower risk of getting HPV
- A lesbian is not at risk of getting HPV
- If a woman only has oral sex she is not at risk of getting HPV
- A healthy lifestyle lowers the risk of HPV infection
- You can only get HPV from men
- If a woman hasn't had sexual intercourse she is not at risk of getting HPV
- If a woman hasn't been sexually active for over 5 years she is not at risk of getting HPV
- If a woman hasn't been sexually active for over 10 years she is not at risk of getting HPV
- If a woman has only been with one partner she is not at risk of getting HPV
- If a woman has been with the same partner for more than 5 years she is not at risk of developing cervical cancer
- HPV is rare
- HPV is common
- Only promiscuous women get HPV

Don't know
Disagree
Neither disagree nor agree
Agree
The following may be symptoms of cervical cancer. Please let us know whether you think they are or not.

- Vaginal bleeding: 3% (Yes), 14% (No), 7% (Don't know)
- Persistent lower back pain: 6% (Yes), 28% (No), 22% (Don't know)
- Persistent vaginal discharge that smells unpleasant: 11% (Yes), 22% (No), 38% (Don't know)
- Discomfort or pain during sex: 7% (Yes), 21% (No), 39% (Don't know)
- Menstrual periods that are heavier or longer than usual: 4% (Yes), 21% (No), 39% (Don't know)
- Persistent diarrhoea: 10% (Yes), 38% (No), 52% (Don't know)
- Vaginal bleeding after the menopause: 4% (Yes), 20% (No), 36% (Don't know)
- Persistent pelvic pain: 4% (Yes), 19% (No), 39% (Don't know)
- Vaginal bleeding during or after sex: 5% (Yes), 22% (No), 33% (Don't know)
- Blood in the stool or urine: 7% (Yes), 24% (No), 32% (Don't know)
- Unexplained weight loss: 7% (Yes), 24% (No), 32% (Don't know)
Have you ever experienced any of the above symptoms?

- Yes: 29%
- No: 71%

What is your current relationship status?

- Married/in a civil partnership: 68%
- Co-habiting but not married/in a civil partnership: 8%
- Widowed: 6%
- Separated: 2%
- Divorced: 6%
- Single - not in a relationship: 6%
- In a relationship but not co-habiting: 3%
- Other: 1%
- Prefer not to say: 1%

In the last 20 years, approximately how many different sexual partners have you had?

- None: 9%
- 1: 10%
- 2: 7%
- 3: 3%
- 4: 2%
- 5: 1%
- 6: 1%
- 7: 1%
- 8: 1%
- 9+: 2%
- Can't recall: 1%
- Prefer not to say: 4%
Please tell us which age bracket you fit into

- 50-54: 21%
- 55-59: 21%
- 60-64: 28%
- 65-69: 20%
- 70-74: 8%
- 75+: 2%