# Having a smear test after the age of 50

The last ten years has seen a decline in the number of women attending for their smear test. This means many more women who are at risk of cervical cancer and who could be detected at a very early stage are missing out.

Unfortunately a third of cervical cancer diagnoses are in women age over 50 years, yet the number of women in this age group attending for their smear is at a 17 year low.

Currently women between the age of 50-64 years are invited as part of the National Cervical Screening Programme to attend for a smear every 5 years.

Although there are likely to be many different reasons for not attending there are a few common themes which are considered in the questions below.

Please take time to read through these frequently asked questions if you are worried about having a smear. You can also speak to one of the practice nurses or a doctor if you still have concerns or questions.

**I’m worried that my smear test will be painful – as I’ve got older I’ve noticed it has been less comfortable. Why is that ?**

When women go through the perimenopause and menopause the level of the hormone oestrogen declines. The vaginal tissue is particularly sensitive to this fall in oestrogen. This can lead to the tissue in this area becoming less elastic and less stretchy, and more prone to dryness, irritation and inflammation. Not only can this cause discomfort generally but particularly during intercourse and potentially when having a smear. You might find it helpful to look at our information on the Perimenopause and Menopause on our Bilbrook Medical centre website which looks at this in more detail.

Things you can do if you think this applies to you:

* Talk to our practice nurse or a doctor about having some vaginal (topical) oestrogen for at least 2 weeks before your smear. This can usually be done with a telephone consultation. The oestrogen can be in the form of a pessary, cream or a soft ring (Estring). These are easy to use, safe and effective.
* You can use a little **water based** lubricant prior to your smear (examples are YES WB, SYLK which can be bought over the counter). You might find it useful to find out about using a regular vaginal moisturiser too (more information can be found in the Menopause section of our website)
* Tell us about your concerns – if we know you are worried we can take extra time to ensure you are as comfortable as possible and may choose a smaller speculum if required

**Smear tests are more important for young women aren’t they ? I thought cervical cancer is related to sex, I’ve been in a stable relationship for 25 years so I don’t think its as relevant for me ?**

It is still important to attend for your smear test.

Studies show that women above the age of 50 years are more likely to present with advanced cervical cancer, perhaps presuming they are at lower risk. Although your test is less frequent it is still the best way we have to identify individuals at higher risk.

The test is not a test for cancer. It identifies those women who have high risk HPV (Human Papilloma Virus) which can be transmitted by any skin to skin sexual contact. HPV increases risk of cell changes which can lead to cervical cancer. Those with high risk HPV then have cells from their smear test checked (this is part of the same test and does not require a repeat test).

You can carry high risk HPV for many years so being in a long term relationship does not reduce the importance of regular smears tests.

**I find it difficult to get to the doctors for my smear test as I have a busy life and work. What can I do ?**

We understand it can be challenging to make time for your smear test. It can be easy to prioritise other things or other people above yourself, or to keep putting off something you are not particularly looking forward to.

Try to think of a smear test as an absolute priority and book it as soon as you receive your letter – that way it is less likely to get forgotten.

We try to offer a range of appointments with our practice nurses including some early morning appointments

Above all – if you have any worries or questions about having a smear please speak to us.

There is lots of useful information on the Jo’s Trust website with a detailed explanation of what smear tests involve, what HPV is. There are videos to explain about smear tests as well as personal experiences. The videos come in a variety of languages for those with English not their first language.

<https://www.jostrust.org.uk/information>

Jo’s Trust also has a helpline 0808 802 8000