

Cervical Screening Saves Lives: What You Need to Know in 2025

As a London GP, I see firsthand how health inequalities affect access to vital services. One of the most powerful tools we have to prevent cancer is the NHS Cervical Screening Programme—and it's changing for the better. If you're eligible, understanding these changes could save your life or the life of someone you love. Cervical cancer doesn't discriminate. It's preventable, treatable, and beatable—if caught early. That's why we need to talk about it, remove the shame, and make services as inclusive and accessible as possible.

What Is Cervical Screening? Cervical screening (commonly known as a “smear test”) checks the health of your cervix—the opening to your womb. It's not a test for cancer, but for the human papillomavirus (HPV), which causes nearly all cervical cancers. If HPV is found, further tests check for abnormal cells that could become cancerous.

Who Will Be Invited? The NHS invites:

- Women and people with a cervix aged 25 to 64
- Invitations are sent automatically based on your NHS records
- You'll be invited every 5 years, regardless of age, as long as your last result was HPV negative

If you've changed address, make sure we have your current contact details so you don't miss your invitation.

Recent Changes to the Programme The NHS Cervical Screening Programme has been updated to improve accuracy and accessibility:

- **Primary HPV Testing:** Since 2020, the test now looks for HPV first, which is more accurate and helps detect risk earlier.
- **Extended Screening Intervals:** If your HPV test is negative, you'll now be invited every 5 years instead of every 3. This reflects the lower risk and high reliability of HPV testing.
- **Self-Sampling Pilots:** In some areas, patients can now collect their own sample at home. This is especially helpful for those who feel anxious or face barriers to attending a clinic. This will be coming to Cavendish soon – hopefully later this month!
- **Digital Invitations:** More patients are receiving reminders via text and email, making it easier to book appointments.

The HPV Vaccine: Prevention Starts Early The UK's HPV immunisation programme is offered to all children aged 12 to 13 in school, regardless of gender. HPV doesn't just

cause cervical cancer—it can also lead to cancers of the mouth, throat, anus, and penis.

Key facts:

- The vaccine protects against the most dangerous types of HPV.
- It's most effective when given before exposure to the virus (i.e., before sexual activity begins).
- Catch-up programmes are available for older teens and young adults who missed it.

Thanks to the vaccine, we're already seeing a dramatic drop in cervical abnormalities among young people.

Final Thoughts If you've received an invitation for screening, please don't ignore it. If your child is offered the HPV vaccine, say yes. And if you have questions or concerns, speak to your GP—we're here to help, not judge.

Cervical screening and HPV vaccination are two of the most effective public health interventions we have. Let's use them.

Dr Maya Chowdhury