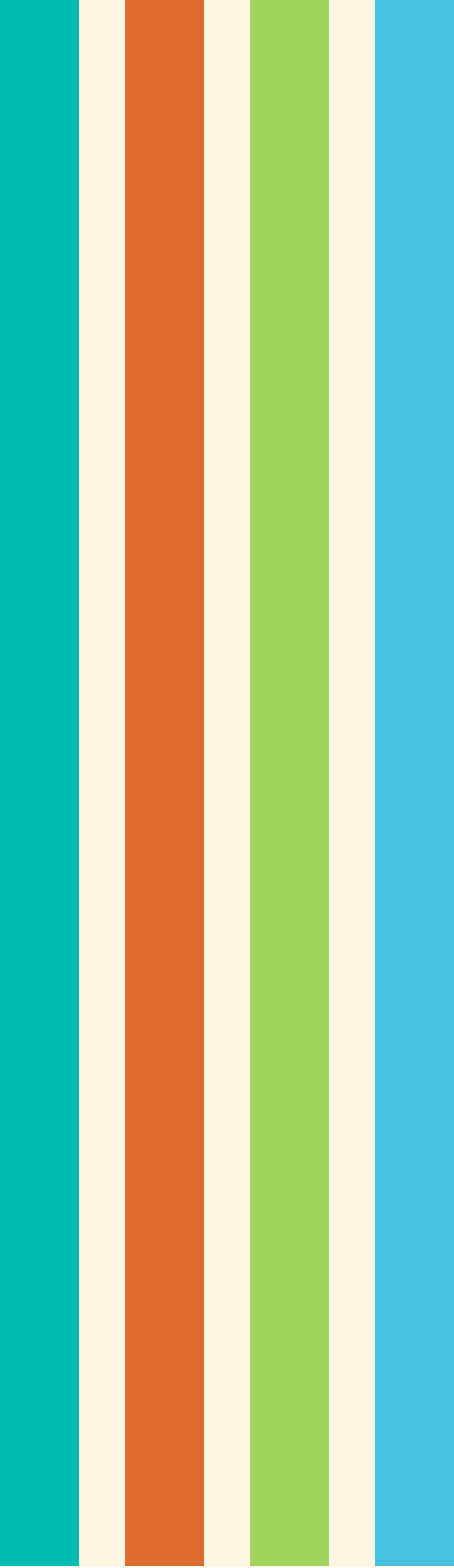


**Cervical  
Screening  
Support**



All women aged 25 to 64 will be invited via letter to a cervical screening, also known as a smear test. The purpose of a cervical screening is to assess the health of the cervix.

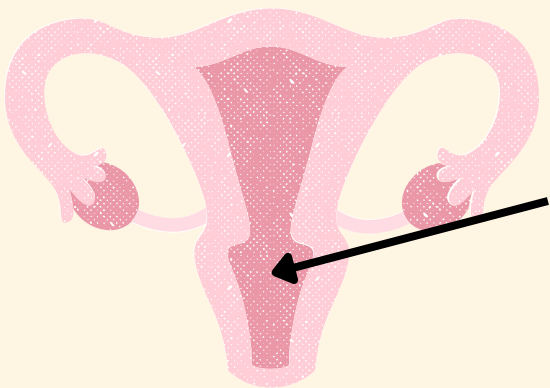
During the appointment, a small sample of cells will be removed from the cervix. These will be checked for human papillomavirus (HPV), which can change the cervix- these are called 'high risk' types of HPV.

If these types of cells are not found, you are not required to take any further tests.

However, if they are found, the cell sample can be checked for any changes in the cervix cells. These can then be treated before they turn into cervical cancer.

## **A step-by-step guide to what happens at a cervical screening:**

1. You will remove your clothes from the waist down. You can do this behind a screen and you will be given a sheet to cover yourself
2. The nurse will ask you to lie back on the bed, with your legs bent, feet together and knees apart. This position may change during the test
3. The nurse will insert a speculum, a smooth, tube-shaped tool, into your vagina
4. The nurse will open the speculum to see inside the cervix
5. Using a soft brush, they will take a small sample of cells from inside the cervix
6. The nurse will close and remove the speculum
7. You will get dressed



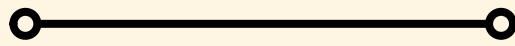
*The whole procedure takes about 10 minutes, with the tissue collection taking less than 5 minutes*

*The procedure will usually be completed by a female*



**More than 1 in 5 adults have been  
subjected to abuse in childhood**

*(Crime Survey England and Wales, 2019)*

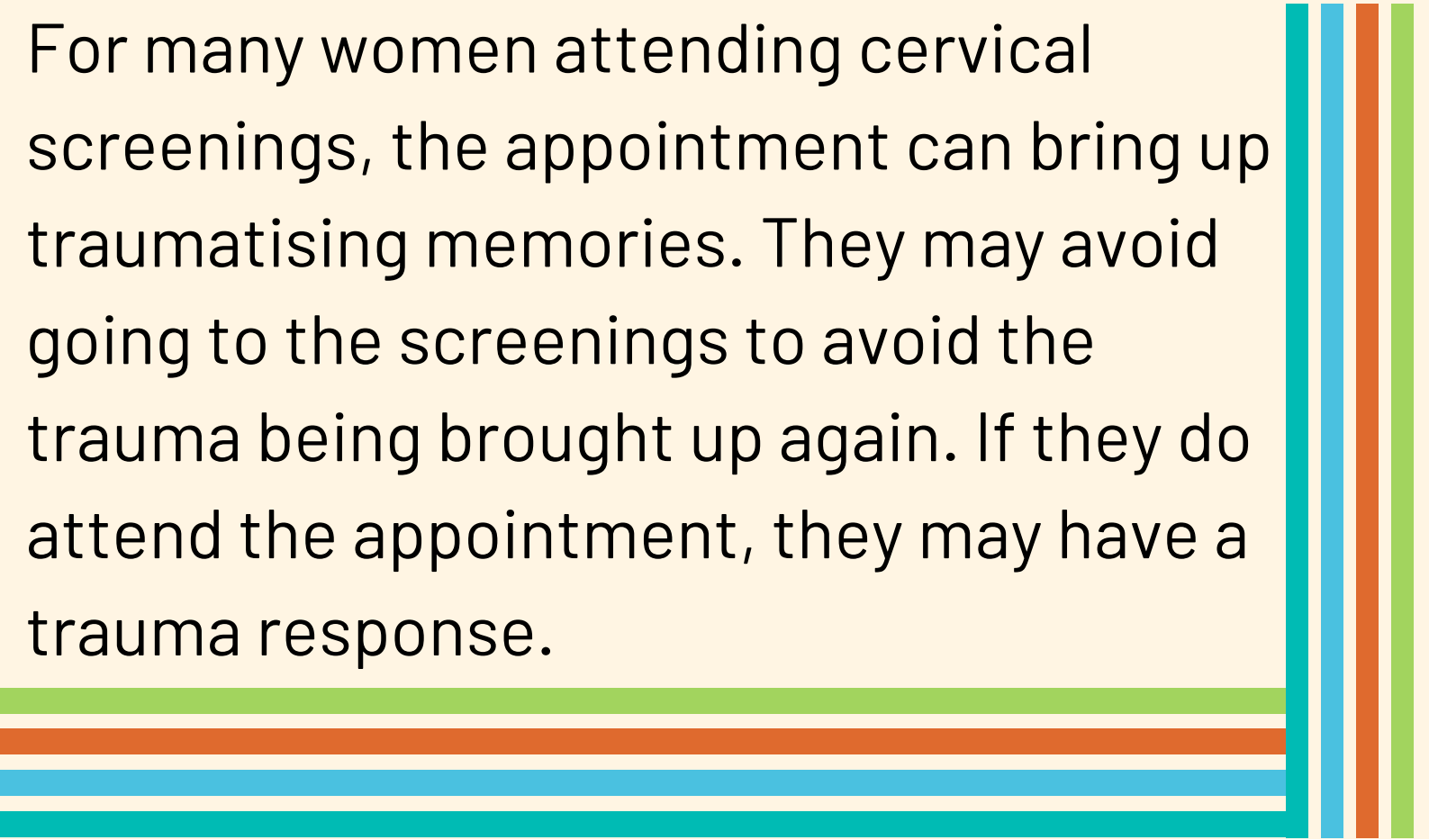


**1 in 3 women will be subjected  
to rape or attempted rape in  
their lifetime**

*(CDC, 2018;WHO, 2018)*



For many women attending cervical screenings, the appointment can bring up traumatising memories. They may avoid going to the screenings to avoid the trauma being brought up again. If they do attend the appointment, they may have a trauma response.



# Trauma Responses



A trauma response is the way someone responds to a traumatic experience. A trauma response does not look the same for everyone. Some are automatic and sub-conscious, as the brain is responding quickly to threat to life and potential danger. Some are linked to thoughts, feelings and sensory input.

- Flashbacks
- Shaking and crying
- Feelings of dread and doom
- Heart palpitations, chest pains or tightness
- Shallow breathing
- Numbness
- Tingling
- Dizziness
- Sweating
- Non-response
- Fainting

**Trauma responses can feel uncontrollable.**

**Individuals who have been subjected to sexual abuse may still experience trauma responses months or even years after the abuse.**

You may feel out of control or helpless during the procedure, and if you want to stop, you may be too anxious to ask the nurse. You may feel triggered by them touching you in certain areas or inserting the speculum.

You may feel as though you are burdening the nurse because you think you are a difficult patient. You may be triggered by them asking you to lie down on the bed and move your body in a certain position.

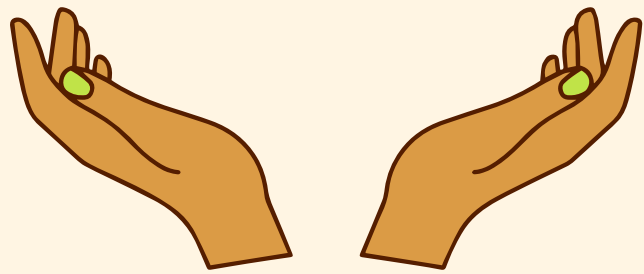
You may feel as though you will look weak in front of the nurse if you start crying. You may be triggered by particular smells or sounds or equipment. You may feel like you should be over this by now, it was so long ago.

**Your feelings are valid. Whatever happened to you does not define you. You are in control of your appointment.**



There are a number of things you can do before, during and after your appointment to ease the anxiety you feel towards your cervical screening. **Always remember that you are in control.**

# Before the appointment



- You can book an appointment before the screening to discuss the procedure with a healthcare professional- if you feel comfortable, you can tell them why you might feel nervous with the procedure. You could also mention any small changes you would like to implement, for example if you would prefer that the nurse or doctor doing the screening to talk to you more throughout the appointment
- You can request to have a healthcare professional of a particular gender for your cervical screening
- Although a chaperone will be present for your appointment, you can also ask a friend or family member you trust to accompany you
- You can ask for a double appointment when you are booking your screening to give you more time for everything. You can ask to go through the procedure slower or ask to see a nurse or doctor you trust
- Think about any questions you might have about your appointment and write them down to ask the healthcare professional before going in for your screening



# During the appointment

- If you feel comfortable, you can discuss with the healthcare professional that is performing your screening that you have been subjected to a traumatic event. This could help them make the whole process as easy as possible for you. You can do this in any way which makes it comfortable for you- if you need to write it down, you can. However, whether you disclose this to a doctor or nurse is completely up to you
- Let them know whether you find any particular words triggering or distressing. This will help them to use alternative language, and in turn help you to feel more relaxed and grounded
- You can ask the healthcare professional to stop at any time for any reason. You could discuss a way for you to communicate this to them at the beginning of the appointment, for example if you raise your hand.

**Even if you do not go all the way through the appointment, this is still a massive step you have taken.**

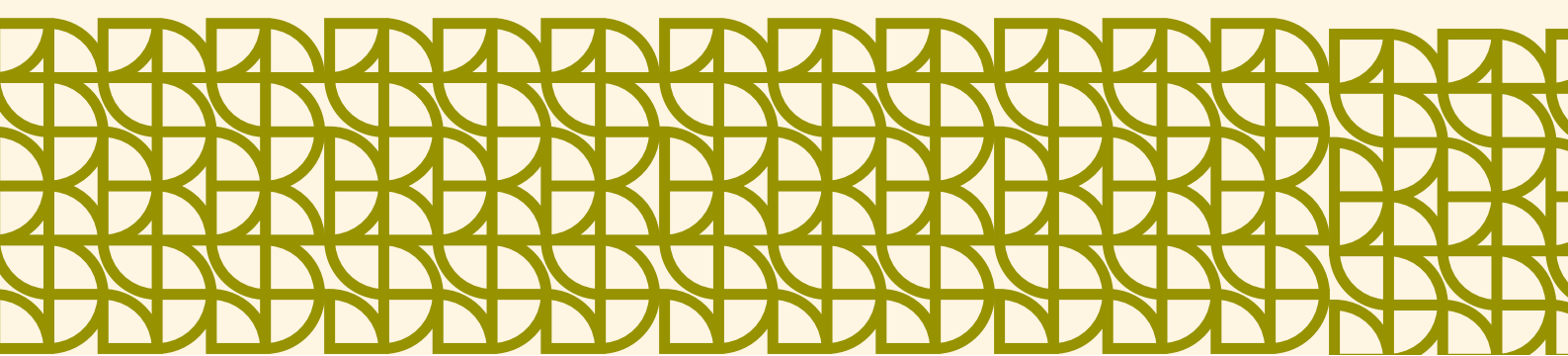


- Grounding techniques, for example doing a breathing exercise may help you feel more comfortable and less anxious
- You may find it useful to listen to music or a podcast through headphones while you are being screened to associate comfort with the procedure
- There are different-sized speculums- you may be more comfortable if you ask the healthcare professional to use the smallest size which is appropriate for you
- You can guide the speculum in yourself if that makes you feel more comfortable
- Wear clothes that you feel comfortable in- if you wear a long skirt, you can leave the skirt on during your screening

**Even if you do not go all the way through the appointment, this is still a massive step you have taken. There is no pressure to have done it all in one appointment. The doctor or nurse will advise you on what they think is the next best step to take**



# For when you don't know how to say it:

- 'Please ask me before touching me'
  - 'Please allow me to take the appointment at my own pace'
  - 'Please tell me what you are doing at each step'
  - 'Please tell me what you are doing every time you touch me'
  - 'Please be patient if I find this difficult'
  - 'If I want you to stop, I will let you know by \_\_\_\_'
  - 'These adjustments would make me feel more comfortable'
  - 'Due to some experiences I have been subjected to, I find healthcare appointments quite frightening'
  - 'I would like you to know that\_\_\_\_'
- 



# After the appointment



- You could plan something you enjoy doing for after your screening. It could be something as simple as getting a coffee and going on a walk, or you could meet up with your friends. Take time out for yourself to do something you love as a form of self-care.
- If you feel overwhelmed after your appointment, you could find a quiet space to sit and calm down. It is normal to feel this way, especially after facing something you found so anxiety-inducing.

**Be kind to yourself. Your trauma responses are not your fault. They are automatic and your body's way of coping with trauma. You should be proud of yourself no matter what.**



# Useful links and contacts

**The Eve Appeal**– *a leading UK national charity funding research into the five gynaecological cancers: womb, ovarian, cervical, vulval and vaginal*

[eveappeal.org.uk](http://eveappeal.org.uk)

0808 802 0019

[nurse@eveappeal.org.uk](mailto:nurse@eveappeal.org.uk)

**The Survivors Trust**– *representing over 120 specialist support services for individuals subjected to rape, sexual abuse and sexual violence in the UK*

[www.survivorstrust.org](http://www.survivorstrust.org)

0808 801 0818

[info@thesurvivorstrust.org](mailto:info@thesurvivorstrust.org)