

Cervical Screening Guide

for Survivors of Sexual Harm

*Ki te kotahi te kakaho ka whati, ki te kapuia,
e kore e whati*

When we stand alone, we are vulnerable,
but together we are unbreakable



Let's do this together.

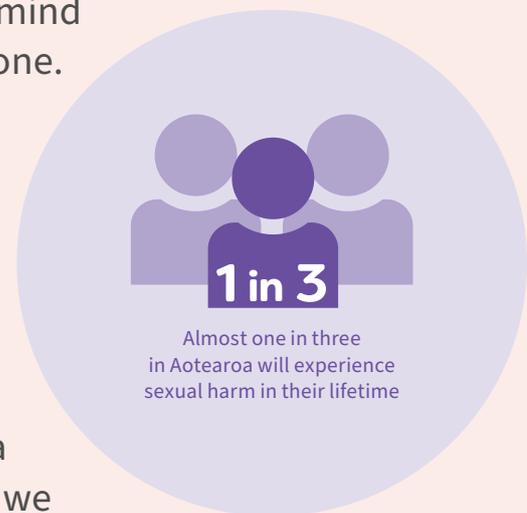
Talk Peach and Brave proudly present the Cervical Screening Guide for Survivors of Sexual harm.

Cervical screening (whakamātautau waha kōpū) can be an uncomfortable process for anyone - but for people who have faced sexual harm, it can be profoundly traumatising. We have developed this guide to help people understand exactly what the process involves, what may be uncomfortable or triggering, and how to ensure a safe environment for your cervical screening.

More than anything, we want this guide to remind you that you don't have to go through this alone.

Almost one in three people in Aotearoa will experience sexual harm in their lifetime - with [women three times more likely than men](#) and members of the [LGBTQIA+ community twice](#) as likely as the rest of the country. With half of our [wāhine Māori](#) also experiencing sexual harm in their lives, a massive number of people are affected - and we are stronger together.

We hope this guide provides the support and guidance you need on your cervical screening journey.



What is a **cervical screening**, and why do I need one?

Regular cervical screenings can help detect HPV (the human papillomavirus) and prevent [cervical cancer](#) by picking up signs of abnormal cells in the cervix before it turns into cancer. Cervical cancer is one of the easiest cancers to prevent - as long as the cell changes that cause it are detected **EARLY**.

During a cervical screening, your GP, nurse or gynaecologist will open your vagina gently with a plastic or metal speculum and use a soft brush to take a sample of cells from your cervix (this can be uncomfortable but most often not too painful). The appointment usually takes around ten minutes, and the test itself around one minute. This sample is then sent away to be tested for abnormalities.



Test takes approx
1 min

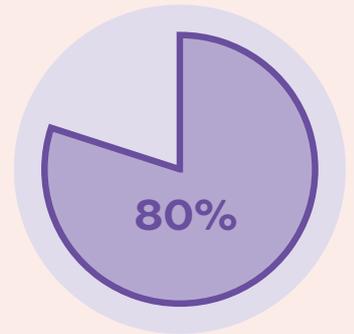


The importance of **te whare tangata**

In Māori terms, the womb is often referred to as 'te whare tangata', or the house of humanity, where human life is created and grows. The cervix is a vital part of te whare tangata as it is the gatekeeper to all it encompasses and a pathway to whakapapa (genealogy). Within the context of cervical screening, the entire female reproductive system is considered taonga (treasure) and, therefore, essential to care for.

What is HPV?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI). Anyone at any age can be infected, and around 80% of people will contract HPV at some point in their lives.



There are many strains of HPV, and depending on the type, it can cause warts to develop on other areas of the body - usually on the genitals or surrounding areas. Some people with HPV do not develop symptoms; however, they can still pass on the infection to others through penetrative and non-penetrative sexual contact (genital-genital, oral-genital, anal-genital, oral-anal).

Symptoms of HPV may go away on their own, and many people's immune systems will clear an HPV infection within two years. However, this is not always the case and left untreated an HPV infection can turn into life-threatening cancer - 99% of cervical cancers are caused in this way.

All people with a cervix aged 25-70 should have regular cervical screenings (every three years) to help detect the presence of HPV or any abnormal cell changes in the cervix before it turns into cancer. There is also an HPV vaccination that protects against the primary cancer-causing strains of HPV and is free for everyone aged 9-26.

Where to get a cervical screening:

You have control over who performs your cervical screening. You might choose to go to your usual GP or one of the following options:

Any doctor or practice nurse

Family Planning

A sexual health service

Community health services, including Māori, Pacific, LGBTQIA+ or women's health centres.



[Directory](#) for nationwide Māori health providers



From 2023, you will have the option to **self-test**. You will be able to take a vaginal swab yourself, in privacy, when you visit your healthcare provider.

Advice for survivors of sexual harm attending cervical screening appointments



Before the appointment

You could make a separate appointment with the healthcare professional performing your cervical screening to discuss the test process beforehand. This will allow you to make sure it is someone you feel comfortable with performing the test, to digest the necessary information before your screening, or to mention any adjustments to the process that might make you feel more comfortable.

If you don't want to go in for two separate appointments but still want more time to talk things through or to go at a slower pace, then you could request a double appointment when booking your screening, allowing your smear taker the time to chat things over with you beforehand.

You can ask for someone from your culture to perform the test.

You can ask for the test taker to be of a particular gender.

Think of any questions you have and write them down so that you can take them with you to your appointment

Arrange for a family member or friend to come with you to your appointment for support

Reducing anxiety during the appointment:

You can ask to guide the speculum in yourself if this will help you feel more in control.

You could ask to bring a support person with you, or you can ask for a chaperone to be provided if you would prefer someone else in the room.

Some people find it helpful to take some headphones to their appointment so that they can listen to music.

Wearing clothes you feel comfortable in can help - You might want to wear your comfy trackies and hoody, or if you wear skirts or dresses, you can leave them on during your test.

Taking along an object that comforts you or brings you strength can also provide comfort.

Relaxation techniques and breathing exercises are known to reduce anxiety. These can be practiced before your screening so that you know which ones work for you. For example:

- Try breathing in for four seconds, holding for five and then out for seven. If you focus on this pattern, it will help to relax your body as well as distract your mind.
 - Try looking around the room and noticing the shapes of objects and the colours you see; describing them to yourself can distract you from the task at hand and help prevent or pull you out of flashbacks.
 - Try using pre-prepared positive coping statements. This could be something like; '*This memory will pass*', or '*I am safe right now*', '*I'm looking after myself and my whānau*'.
-

After the appointment:

If you need to, you could ask for access to a quiet place to sit down, gather yourself, or calm down before you leave.

Make a plan to do something that you enjoy or find relaxing after your appointment. For example, you could meet up with a friend or schedule some alone time, depending on what makes you feel better.

Remember that trauma responses are normal and to be kind to yourself.



Valuable resources, contacts and support



<https://www.bravenz.com/about.html>



<https://www.talkpeach.org.nz/>