

Why Are Women Missing Cervical Screening in Portsmouth?

Understanding Local Uptake, Inequalities and Patient-Reported Barriers

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Introduction

Cervical cancer is largely preventable through HPV vaccination and regular cervical screening. The World Health Organization (WHO) has set a global elimination strategy (90-70-90 targets), aiming for 90% HPV vaccination coverage, 70% screening uptake, and 90% treatment of cervical disease. The NHS has committed to eliminating cervical cancer in England by 2040.

Despite this ambition, screening uptake remains uneven across the country, with lower participation often observed in coastal and deprived communities. Portsmouth, a coastal city in the Wessex region, has cervical screening coverage below national averages, particularly among women aged 25–49 years. There is also substantial variation in uptake between GP practices across the city.

Understanding these variations and identifying barriers to participation are essential to improving screening uptake and reducing inequalities in preventative healthcare.

Objectives

This project aims to explore cervical screening uptake in Portsmouth and identify opportunities to improve participation.

Specifically, we sought to:

- Assess cervical screening coverage across Portsmouth
- Identify variation in uptake between GP practices
- Compare local screening rates with regional and national averages
- Use local consultation findings to understand barriers to screening

Methods

A descriptive analysis of cervical screening and HPV vaccination data in Portsmouth was undertaken.

Data sources included:

- Local cervical screening coverage data
- GP practice-level screening uptake data
- HPV vaccination coverage statistics
- National and regional comparator data

To provide context on patient perspectives, the Portsmouth Cervical Screening Consultation 2025 was sent out. The consultation received 6,264 responses from residents eligible for screening and explored experiences and barriers to participation. Identified themes were considered alongside local screening uptake data.

Results and discussion

Portsmouth cervical screening uptake is lower than regional and national averages, particularly for women aged 25–49.

| | Portsmouth | SE region | England |
|--------|------------|-----------|---------|
| 25-49Y | 62.1% | 67.8% | 66.1% |
| 50-64 | 71.5% | 74.5% | 74.3% |

Figure 1. Cervical screening uptake in Portsmouth compared with regional and national averages.

Screening uptake among women aged 25–49 varies substantially across GP practices in Portsmouth.

| GP | Coverage | |
|----------------------------------|----------|--------|
| | 25-49Y | 50-64Y |
| England | 67.5% | 74.9% |
| East Shore Partnership | 74.3% | 77.2% |
| The Drayton Surgery | 73.9% | 80.3% |
| Kirklands Surgery | 73.6% | 76.1% |
| Derby Road Practice | 67.8% | 73.4% |
| Portsdown Group Practice | 67.3% | 71.9% |
| Island City Practice | 65.7% | 69.9% |
| Trafalgar Medical Group Practice | 64.2% | 70.0% |
| Craneswater Group Practice | 61.8% | 71.6% |
| The Lighthouse Group Practice | 57.2% | 64.7% |
| The Unicity Medical Centre | 40.4% | 77.9% |

Figure 2. Variation in cervical screening uptake across GP practices in Portsmouth.

Key barriers to screening

Access to appointments

- Difficulty booking convenient screening appointments

Anxiety or embarrassment

- Discomfort or embarrassment associated with the screening procedure

Limited awareness of screening

- Uncertainty about the purpose or importance of cervical screening

Previous negative experiences

- Prior uncomfortable or distressing screening experiences

Practical barriers

- Work, childcare, or travel commitments affecting attendance

Figure 3. Key themes relating to barriers to cervical screening identified through the Portsmouth Cervical Screening Consultation 2025 (n = 6,264 responses).

Impact – What if it works?

Successfully providing tailored patient feedback to Portsmouth GPs will bridge the gap between patient experience and clinical practice. If it works, we anticipate:

- Tailored Practice Improvements: GP "Insight Packs" will allow for bespoke interventions—such as addressing specific booking barriers or parking issues—rather than generic city-wide campaigns.
- Increased Screening Uptake: By tackling local deterrents like appointment anxiety and timing, we aim to drive Portsmouth's uptake toward the NHS 80% target and help eliminate cervical cancer.
- Reduced Inequalities: Local data will empower practices to better support under-served groups, ensuring more equitable access across the city's diverse populations.
- Evidence-Based Innovation: Targeted feedback ensures resources are focused on the most effective recruitment methods, such as enhanced text reminders and trauma-informed care.
- Long-term Prevention: Improved attendance will lead to earlier detection of high-risk HPV, preventing cancer development and reducing the long-term burden on regional healthcare services.

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