

## **WI research on attitudes towards HPV self-sampling in England and Wales**

### **Overview**

Between August and October 2020, the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) carried out a survey to understand attitudes towards cervical screening and sampling methods in England and Wales. All women and people with a cervix aged 25 and over were invited to take part. There was no upper age limit.

This briefing focusses on the findings of one strand of this research, attitudes towards HPV self-sampling. You can find out more about the other themes identified in our research [here](#).

This research was part of an ongoing WI project on cervical screening – our 5 Minutes that Matter campaign which seeks to raise awareness of the importance of attending routine cervical screenings, and support more women to make an informed decision about whether or not to take up their invitations.

### **Key messages from the WI's findings on HPV self-sampling**

- There is considerable support for the option of HPV self-sampling among women who are eligible for cervical screening.
- However, around half of respondents would prefer to continue to attend cervical screening at a GP surgery.
- Those aged 25 to 49 were more likely than those aged between 50 and 64 to have concerns about the practicalities and reliability of HPV self-sampling. They were also less likely to feel confident in their ability to carry out the test themselves.
- Respondents over the age of 64 were overwhelmingly positive about attending routine cervical screening past the current upper age limit if this were to be made available.

### **What is the WI calling for on HPV self-sampling?**

- **Further research and pilot studies to help build a strong evidence base for the introduction of HPV self-sampling in the most effective and accessible way. We would like to see the option of self-sampling available as early as possible once this evidence base is in place.**
- **People's questions, concerns and experiences to be taken into account in the development of a self-sample test for cervical screening.**
- **Further research on the benefits of extending the upper age of cervical cancer screening beyond 64.**

### **What is HPV self-sampling?**

Most cervical screening is currently done in GP surgeries by a practice nurse. In some parts of the UK, it is also possible to go to a local sexual health clinic.

Cervical screening isn't always easy, and several factors contribute to this such as having a physical disability, embarrassment, traumatic experiences and difficulties getting appointments.

According to Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust, the Coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the downward trend in cervical screening attendance in the UK with appointments being disrupted in the early stages and many women now feeling more uncertain about attending.

The option to carry out the test yourself in the privacy of your own home isn't a complete solution for all women who find it difficult to attend cervical screening, but it can make a huge difference.

In 2021, self-sampling is being trialled in five boroughs in London as part of the YouScreen trial, which is being run by NHS England, Public Health England, NHS Digital and King's College London.

It involves using a kit provided by the NHS, which comes with detailed instructions. Unlike the traditional test, a speculum is not involved. The kit would come with a vaginal swab that you would use to collect a sample. Once you have completed the test, which should only take a few minutes, you would then post it to the laboratory for testing using the instructions provided. Like the screening test you would have in a GP practice or sexual health clinic, your result would be sent to you in the post.

### **Demographics of the WI's survey respondents:**

In total we received 2,849 complete responses.

- 87% were based in England and 12% in Wales. Less than 1% were based in each of the following areas: Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man
- 39% were aged 25 to 49
- 38% were aged 50 to 64
- 20% were aged 65 to 74
- 3% were aged 75 or older

### **Attitudes towards HPV self-sampling amongst those eligible for screening**

#### **Responses of those aged 25 to 64:**

- 52% of people aged 25 to 64 said they would prefer to attend cervical screening at their GP surgery. 42% said they would prefer to take the test at home using a self-sampling kit. 2% said they would like to take the test at their GP surgery using a self-sampling kit.
- For the majority (91%), the coronavirus pandemic has not impacted their preference for where they would like cervical screening to take place in the future.
- 67% said taking the test at home using a self-sampling kit would be more convenient than attending a screening appointment with their GP or nurse.
- 36% would not feel confident in their ability to carry out the test using a self-sampling kit. The same percentage would not feel confident that they would be able to take an adequate sample using a self-sampling kit.
- 50% said they would find taking the test at home using a self-sampling kit less embarrassing than attending a cervical screening appointment.
- 34% said they would feel more in control of the test itself if they used a self-sampling kit than if they attended a screening appointment with their GP or nurse.
- 38% said that taking the test at home would be less uncomfortable or painful than if a doctor or nurse did it.
- 36% were unsure whether they would trust the results of a self-sampling kit. 29% said they would not.

### **Differences in attitudes and preferences between age groups:**

- 57% of people aged 25 to 49 would prefer to attend cervical screening at their GP surgery. 37% said they would prefer to take the test at home using a self-sampling kit.
- 48% of people aged 50 to 64 would prefer to attend cervical screening at their GP surgery. 47% said they would prefer to take the test at home using a self-sampling kit.
- 40% of respondents aged 50 to 64 said that taking the test at home using a self-sampling kit would be less uncomfortable or painful than if a nurse or doctor did it, compared to 35% of those aged 25 to 49.
- 41% of respondents aged 50 to 64 would be worried about the potential for the sample to become contaminated, compared with 59% of those aged 25 to 49.
- 40% of respondents aged 50 to 64 would trust the results of a self-sampling kit, compared with 30% of those aged 25 to 49.
- 29% of respondents aged 50 to 64 would be worried about the sample getting lost in the post and not reaching the laboratory, compared with 43% of those aged 25 to 49.
- 53% of respondents aged 50 to 64 would feel confident in their ability to carry out the test using a self-sampling kit, compared with 38% of those aged 25 to 49.
- 48% of respondents aged 50 to 64 feel confident they would be able to take an adequate sample using a self-sampling kit, compared with 33% of those aged 25 to 49.

### **Respondents aged 65 and over:**

- Respondents aged 65 and over were asked what their preference would be if routine cervical screening was available to people over the age of 65. 51% would prefer to take the test at home using a self-sampling kit. 43% would prefer to attend cervical screening at their GP surgery. 3% would prefer not to attend cervical screening at all.
- 69% said that taking the test at home using a self-sampling kit would be more convenient.
- 64% would feel confident in their ability to carry out the test themselves using a self-sampling kit.
- 59% were confident they would be able to take an adequate sample.
- 39% told us that it would be less painful than a nurse or doctor doing it.
- 19% would be worried about the test getting lost in the post, a much lower figure than for those aged 25 to 49.

### **Further information**

Please contact the NFWI's Public Affairs Department at [pa@nfwl.org.uk](mailto:pa@nfwl.org.uk) for more information about this research.

To find out more about the WI's 5 Minutes that Matter campaign, visit [www.thewi.org.uk/campaigns/key-and-current-campaigns/5-minutes-that-matter](http://www.thewi.org.uk/campaigns/key-and-current-campaigns/5-minutes-that-matter)