



## **Smears without tears: A patient's guide to getting through your speculum exam with minimal suffering and your dignity intact**

This information will help you avoid preventable pain and distress during intimate examinations. These may be for routine cervical smear tests or to investigate or treat a problem. To keep the guide simple, it refers to a male doctor, but you may be seen by a male or female doctor or nurse.

### **Hang on a minute...**

Visit the loo beforehand, but before seeing a specialist check first whether he needs a urine sample.

### **Can I tell you something?**

The doctor needs to understand your problem and why it might make your examination difficult or painful. He may think he knows more than he actually does, so take a list of your symptoms and any medical diagnosis. Explain that if he does what you ask, it will reduce your discomfort and make it easier for him to examine you. If you don't get a positive response, you can say 'I feel I'm not being heard'. Talk to the doctor during the procedure and tell him where and when something hurts – and how much – so that he knows whether you mean 'mild discomfort' or 'total agony'. You can always refuse or stop the examination if you are uncomfortable with anything.

### **What are all these people doing here?**

You are entitled to take a friend, relative or partner in to your appointment, but see note 3 overleaf. Ask them to sit by your head unless you need them to see the actual procedure. They can hold your hand and take notes to remind you what was said. They can also help you by speaking up on your behalf if you find it hard to say what you want, so make sure they are aware of your needs. If you prefer, they can keep quiet or just wait for you outside.

You can ask for a female doctor, but there's no guarantee that a woman will be any more gentle or understanding than a man, and there may not always be one available. Official guidelines recommend that clinics provide a second person as chaperone, whether the doctor is male or female. This is usually a female nurse, but your friend could act as chaperone if necessary.

Any students or other doctors present should be introduced to you. It is your choice to give or withhold permission for them to attend your consultation, but see note 4 overleaf.

### **What are you going to do?**

Before you undress, you need to know what to expect. Ensure privacy by asking for the door or screen/curtains to be secured – your companion can help with this. Feel free to look at any instruments the doctor will use. If you need a smaller speculum, make sure he knows this. Ask the doctor to tell you step by step what he is doing; you may need to remind him of your personal needs. To avoid over-stretching the vaginal entrance, ask the doctor to insert the speculum fully before opening it, and take it out slowly. Some women with a problem at the rectal (back) side of the vagina find it more comfortable if the speculum is opened sideways, not up and down.

Putting a lubricant on the speculum makes it glide in much more easily. You can insist that you need this - water may not do the trick. The doctor may worry that it will spoil the smear sample, but this won't happen if it's done carefully. Made-for-sex lubricants are very effective, so only tiny amounts are needed. If you have one of these that you find comfortable to use at home, take it with you for the doctor to use. Otherwise he can use KY jelly.

If you are left uncovered or become cold at any time, ask for a blanket or your clothes to cover you.

### **What position do I need to be in?**

If you are offered leg supports or stirrups and are comfortable with them, use them. They help tilt your pelvis so the cervix is more easily visible.

Dorsal Position without stirrups - practise this version at home before you go:

- i. Lie on your back with your head on one or two pillows (or one folded) so that you can make eye contact with the doctor easily without having to lift your head.
- ii. Ask for a pillow under your hips. This tilts the pelvis to a better angle.
- iii. Place your feet apart, near the edges of the examining couch. If you are told to put your feet together, explain that you will relax more easily with them apart.
- iv. Slide your heels up as close to your hips as you can, then allow your knees to open.

### **What if I have joint problems?**

If you can't open your legs very far, even a 90-degree angle gives the doctor room to work. Your knees need support so that your hip joints can relax fully. Ask your friend and chaperone to stand near enough for you to rest against them. Don't let anyone lean on your legs, or you may tense up.

You may feel more comfortable and relaxed if you lie on your side with your knees bent up towards your chest. This may not be an option for all examinations, but smears may be possible if the doctor is willing to try. A pillow between your knees will reduce any strain on your hips.

**How am I supposed to relax?** Practise this at home too:

Lying on your back, place both hands on your tummy, one below your ribs and one above your pubic bone. Keeping your tummy soft helps your pelvic floor relax. Breathe into your abdomen so that your hands rise and fall but your chest doesn't. Then, as you breathe in, gently push your vulva towards the examiner, like a flower opening. This action helps the muscles relax. Ask the doctor to tell you when he's ready to insert the speculum, and then push a little more as if you are having a poo. This gives you a degree of control and helps to stop you tensing up. Keep breathing and allow your tummy to widen and remain soft. It might make you fart, but don't worry – it's probably happened before!

### **What happens next?**

Afterwards, any discussions with the doctor should wait until you are fully clothed and seated level with him. If you can't sit comfortably, perch on the edge of the chair or even stand. If the doctor has been helpful in meeting your needs then thank him, but if not, it's important to follow it up.

### **Where do I go if I have a problem?**

If you have a problem (or a potential one) with a member of staff, your consultation or any aspect of your care, contact PALS (Patient Advice & Liaison Service). Every Hospital Trust and Primary Care Trust (covering GP surgeries) has a PALS officer who works independently from clinical staff. They can help you make a formal complaint, or even intervene so that you don't have to.

### **Extra notes for specialist appointments**

1. When you visit a new doctor it helps to take a written note of your history as a reminder. Give a copy to the doctor – this can save time and avoid repeating unhelpful treatments.
2. During the examination, it may be useful to show the doctor where it hurts, so take a long-handled mirror with you in case it's needed.
3. It may be important to talk to the doctor alone, to tell him if you have ever been sexually abused or to reassure him if you have not. While this is happening you should be fully clothed (unless you need to show him something), and your companion should be out of earshot.
4. Students attend consultations as part of their training. You can refuse permission for them to attend yours, but remember that they might learn something valuable from you to help their future patients. The advantage for you is that when a doctor is teaching students, he is likely to be more thorough and explain things more fully.
5. Ask if there will be a follow-up appointment and if so, make it on your way out if you can. This avoids going to the end of the waiting list or being sent an appointment you can't make. If the doctor was helpful, you could ask to see him again to get the best care, and avoid repeating your story. It may be worth checking that he will be available just before your next appointment, but bear in mind that last-minute changes may be made in an emergency.

**For further information** and the latest version of this guide see <http://www.vulvalpainsociety.org/>