

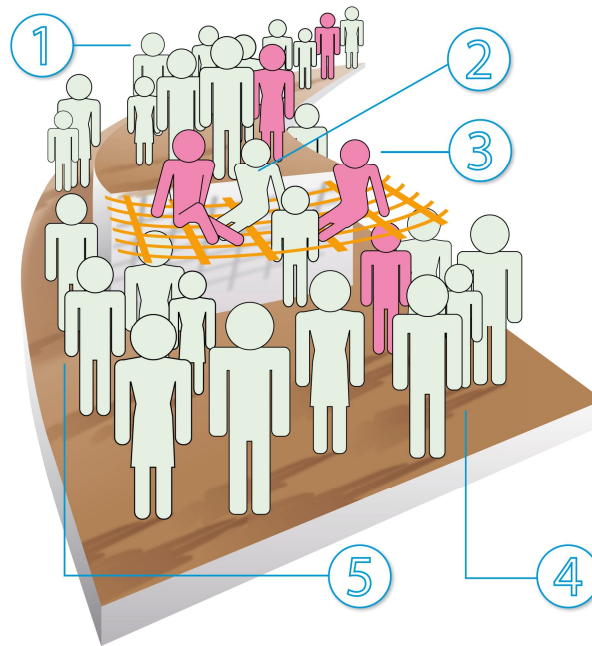
Thinking of having a private screening test?

Things to consider before you decide

Good health is something we all value, and many of us take positive steps to stay as healthy as we can – perhaps by eating a balanced diet, taking regular exercise or stopping smoking.

We can also have health checks, called 'screening', to spot problems before they get too serious. Screening is a bit like sifting people through a sieve. Most of us pass straight through, but a few get picked up in the mesh. These few can then go on to have treatment or make an informed choice about what to do next.

The NHS offers a number of screening tests throughout our lifetime, from pregnancy and birth right through to retirement. Private companies offer screening too – sometimes called 'health MOTs', 'health checks', 'preventative tests' or similar.



1. These people are offered the screening test
2. These people have decided to have the screening test
3. People caught in the screening sieve have been identified as possibly having the condition being screened for and will therefore be offered further investigations (*only the person in pink actually has the condition and has been correctly identified, the others are unaffected by the condition and are termed false positive results*)
4. These people have all passed through the screening sieve and identified as not being at risk of the condition being screened for and will therefore not be offered further investigations (*the person in pink does have the condition being screened for and has slipped through the screening net unidentified – this is termed a 'false negative result'*)
5. Some people may decide not to have the screening test

Screening pros and cons

Having a test to make sure you or your unborn baby is healthy sounds like a sensible idea. After all, if everything is fine, you'll feel reassured. And if there is a problem, it's not too late to do something about it.

Unfortunately, it's not as simple as that, because even the best screening test may not be 100 per cent accurate. Tests may not always give you clear cut answers, and the results could even be confusing:

- A false positive result suggests you have a problem when in fact you don't. False positives can result in further tests and procedures that you don't need, and a lot of unnecessary worry.
- A false negative result misses a problem altogether. You may go away feeling relieved, and brush aside any signs of trouble later on – thinking that everything must be fine.

NHS screening – balancing benefit with risk

The NHS has thought very carefully about these issues, taking advice from a group of experts called the UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC). We only run screening programmes when good evidence shows that the benefits outweigh any risks. We also offer a complete service, not just a test – making sure you understand why you've been offered screening, what the outcomes might be, if there are any downsides, and what your options are for each outcome. We also make sure that any care you may need is in place.

There are eight national screening programmes in England. The diagram on the last page shows what these are, who they're for and how you can find out more.

Private screening

Private companies offer a wide range of health checks, from simple blood tests and physical examinations to full body scans and screening for serious conditions like aneurysm or heart failure. If you're thinking about paying for any of these, it's worth asking a few questions first.

What do I hope to gain from this test?

**** Very importantly, if you have any symptoms, go to your doctor. ****

If you don't have any symptoms, you're probably looking for peace of mind. Are you sure this test is going to offer that? For example, an 'MOT' is limited in what it covers, so it can't really offer a clean bill of health. Look for clear, balanced information on what's being tested. If you already know that you should take some exercise and cut down on alcohol or cigarettes, will this test tell you anything new?

Can I get the information I need another way?

If what you're really after is health advice, you may be able to get this from somewhere else. Your GP is a good place to start, or you could try a website such as NHS Choices (<http://www.nhs.uk/>) or Patient UK (<http://www.patient.co.uk/>).

Can I get this test on the NHS?

Some companies offer screening for conditions already covered by an NHS programme. Ask yourself how the private test differs, and try to compare the whole service, not just the test itself.

Is the screening company properly regulated?

Most private screening tests are offered by reputable companies, but it's important to check. From October 2010, all providers of screening services in England need to be registered with the Care Quality Commission, so check them out at www.cqc.org.uk.

What does the fee cover?

Make sure you understand what you're paying for. Will the company charge extra to follow up your results? If so, how much will it cost?

Can the test do more harm than good?

Some tests carry a risk in themselves (such as CT scans, which use radiation). Has the company provided balanced information about the risk? Is this outweighed by the benefit of the test? Pros and cons can be hard to judge, so ask for the facts in writing, and make sure the company offers you the chance to discuss any concerns.

What if the test picks something up?

The obvious selling point for screening is that if you can catch a problem early, you can do something about it. Make sure this is really true for the test you're considering. If it picks up a problem, is there a treatment available, and is it acceptable to you? If the answer is 'no', you might prefer not to have the test at all.

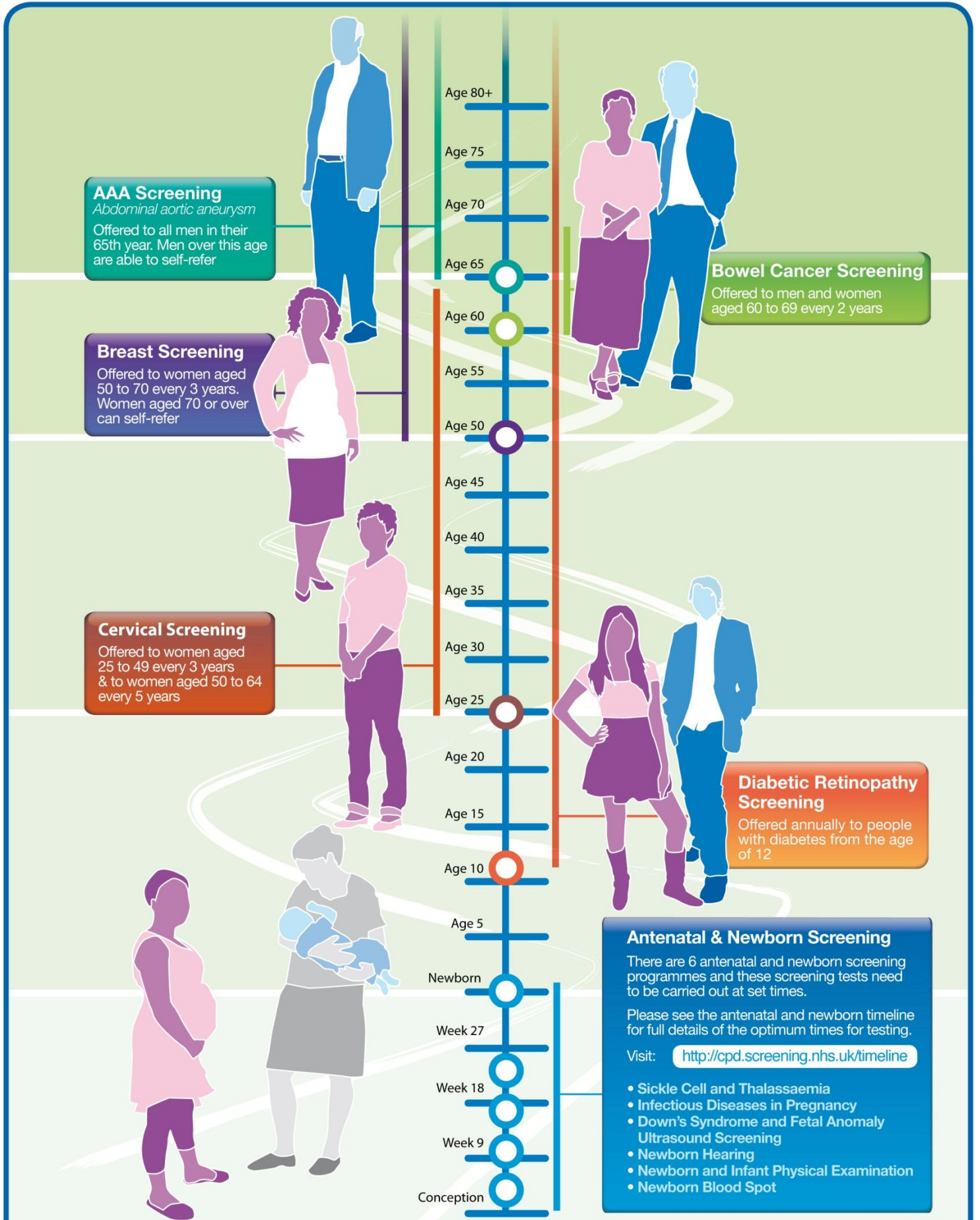
What if there are no clear results?

Find out what support the company offers if a test result is not clear. If there's a chance that you'll need more tests, ask what they involve, how much they cost and who will be doing them.

In conclusion ... screening has many advantages, but it also has its downside, and it sometimes involves difficult choices. NHS screening programmes care for you throughout the whole process, including any further treatment and care that you may need. In the case of private screening, it's worth finding out exactly what you're getting for your money.

Most private screening companies offer a good quality service, but before you go ahead with a test, check that the company is properly regulated, and ask for clear written information about the risks involved as well as the benefits. And finally, remember that the screening test may already be available for free on the NHS.

NHS Screening Timeline



AAA Screening
Abdominal aortic aneurysm
Offered to all men in their 65th year. Men over this age are able to self-refer

Breast Screening
Offered to women aged 50 to 70 every 3 years. Women aged 70 or over can self-refer

Cervical Screening
Offered to women aged 25 to 49 every 3 years & to women aged 50 to 64 every 5 years

Bowel Cancer Screening
Offered to men and women aged 60 to 69 every 2 years

Diabetic Retinopathy Screening
Offered annually to people with diabetes from the age of 12

Antenatal & Newborn Screening
There are 6 antenatal and newborn screening programmes and these screening tests need to be carried out at set times.
Please see the antenatal and newborn timeline for full details of the optimum times for testing.
Visit: <http://cpd.screening.nhs.uk/timeline>

- Sickle Cell and Thalassaemia
- Infectious Diseases in Pregnancy
- Down's Syndrome and Fetal Anomaly Ultrasound Screening
- Newborn Hearing
- Newborn and Infant Physical Examination
- Newborn Blood Spot