



03 June 2020

Deputy Réada Cronin  
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**Our Ref:** GM/Communications

**PQ9216/20: To ask the Minister for Health when cancer screening treatments will resume to prevent cancer fatalities increasing during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter.**

Dear Deputy Cronin,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

The National Screening Service (NSS) develops and manages delivery of population-based, call-recall, national screening programmes: BreastCheck, CervicalCheck, BowelScreen and Diabetic RetinaScreen. The aim is prevention and early detection of disease to reduce deaths and incidence of disease in the populations screened.

Each programme provides free screening at defined intervals to a specific target population. Almost 2 million individuals in Ireland are eligible for at least one of the programmes.

The NSS programmes were paused in March 2020 as part of the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pause was put in place to protect patients and staff by complying with social distancing guidelines. In addition, the HSE temporarily redeployed staff and resources, where available, to the response to COVID-19. However, clinical staff continue to work within the programmes.

Please be reassured that the safe restart of screening is a priority for the NSS. The four screening programmes are close to finalising their recommencement plans and determining the critical path to re-start screening. This is notwithstanding certain dependencies that remain outside the programmes' control.

These plans include:

- An analysis of the operation of treatment pathways
- Ensuring providers have full teams in place for delivery of the service in a timely way
- The provision of changed work practices in all our teams and a schedule for their implementation
- Use of PPE and clear infection control guidelines
- Close adherence to Public Health principles and guidance in order to keep patients and staff safe from COVID-19.

The NSS has established a cross-functional working group to support the managed restart of its programmes. It is chaired by Dr Caroline Mason Mohan, NSS Director of Public Health, and Interim Clinical Director of CervicalCheck. The group will work with the HSE steering group chaired by Dr Colm Henry and Anne O'Connor, on the continuity of system-wide non-COVID healthcare.

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## An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála National Screening Service

The Group is reviewing the individual programme plans for recommencement and providing a framework to support the safe restart of screening. The work of the group includes:

- Establishing protocols to comply with all HSE & Public Health social distancing and infection control guidelines, use of PPE gear, and reducing contact to protect patients and staff
- Evaluating the effect of safety protocols - such as cleaning of equipment and waiting room throughput in clinics - on capacity and activity within screening
- Assessing the operation of diagnostic and management pathways and the willingness of people to attend appointments
- Establishing a communications plan
- Reporting on the challenges and dependencies of screening within the wider hospital system.

When restart dates are finalised, invitations for breast and cervical screening will be issued.

The recommencement of screening is underpinned by the assumption that there will be no worsening of the COVID situation & restrictions will continue to ease.

It is important to emphasise that screening is for seemingly well people who do not have symptoms and not primarily a tool for cancer diagnosis. Therefore, women who are in-between screening appointments, or waiting rescheduled appointments, are being asked to be aware of, and act on, any symptoms associated with the conditions being screened for.

If a woman has concerns about symptoms she is urged to contact her GP immediately. For other queries, she can call the Freephone information line on 1800 45 45 55, email [info@breastcheck.ie](mailto:info@breastcheck.ie) or [info@cervicalcheck.ie](mailto:info@cervicalcheck.ie) or contact her clinic directly.

I trust this information is of assistance to you, but should you have any further queries please contact me.

Celine Fitzgerald  
Interim CEO  
National Screening Service

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National Screening Service



An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Coek  
The National Breast Screening Programme



AN CLÁR NÁISIÚNTA SCAGTHÁSTÁLA CERVICAES  
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME



An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Púilíge  
The National Bowel Screening Programme



An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Retiní do Diaibéitigh  
The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme