



27 May 2020

Deputy Anne Rabbitte
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ6145/20: To ask the Minister for Health the projected number of smear tests that have not been carried out due to Covid-19 restrictions; the date normal operating times are expected to commence; the expected date for full capacity to be restored for carrying out smear tests; the plans in place to work throughs backlogs; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Rabbitte

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

CervicalCheck was paused on 30 March 2020, in line with the Government response to Covid-19. The pause is to protect patients and staff by complying with social distancing guidelines. The HSE has temporarily redeployed available staff and resources to the response to Covid-19. However, clinical staff continue to work within the programme.

The pause in the CervicalCheck programme is for community testing (GPs and clinics) and not for patients already referred to, or in the process of, being managed within the colposcopy system. Any samples taken in colposcopy units are being HPV tested first, and followed up with cytology where appropriate. Samples taken from patients in a colposcopy clinic setting (including follow-up sample-taking clinics) are being accepted and processed by CervicalCheck.

Tests paused

For the months of March, April and May 2020, the projected number of cervical screening tests to be carried out by CervicalCheck was 69,000. The actual number carried out was 3,255.

This leaves a gap of 65,745 in the total number of cervical screening tests projected to be carried out from March to May this year. Please see the table below for a more complete breakdown. (Please note that the data provided for May are projected numbers.)

It is not yet possible to provide a date for when CervicalCheck screening tests will recommence.

Plans to restart screening

Please be reassured that the safe restart of screening is a priority for the HSE's National Screening Service. The screening programmes are continuing to advance their commencement plans, risk assessments and timelines, notwithstanding certain issues that remain outside of their control at the time of writing.

Screening restart

To this end, 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, National Screening Service 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-

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COVID healthcare. The Group is reviewing the individual programme plans for recommencement, and providing a framework to support the safe restart of screening.

Objectives of the NSS working group include:

- The principles for the restart, including prioritisation and managing waiting lists
- A risk assessment tool for the safe resumption of screening across the programmes
- Guidance on infection control considerations for screening programmes and use of PPE to protect patients and staff
- Support in modelling programme capacity to inform planning
- Clear communications to the public and stakeholders of the restart of each of the programmes, priority groups, capacity and objectives.

When restart dates are finalised, screening will be re-introduced on a phased basis over a period of months. Invitations for screening will be issued according to clinical prioritisation, and taking screening and treatment pathways into account. It is our priority that everyone who is due a screening appointment will be invited for screening.

Capacity

We are consulting with our sample takers, laboratories and colposcopy clinics, and assessing if teams are equipped and in place to contribute fully to the delivery of services.

Laboratories are fully operational and available to service their requisite number of CervicalCheck tests per month.

The decision to restart cervical screening will be based on HSE and Department of Health guidance, as measures to prevent transmission of Covid-19 are amended by Government. The health, wellbeing and safety of our clients continue to be our top priority at this time.

It is important to emphasise that screening is not the correct pathway for people who have symptoms. Women who are between screening appointments, or waiting for rescheduled appointments, should be aware of, and act upon, any symptoms associated with cervical cancer. If they have concerns about symptoms they should contact their GP immediately. Information on symptoms can be found on hse.ie/cervicalcheck

For other queries, women can call the Freephone information line on 1800 45 45 55, or email info@cervicalcheck.ie

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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Table showing actual number of cervical screening tests carried out in primary care settings.

2020 Month	The target number of unique women who will have had one or more cervical screening test in a primary care setting	The number of women who had one or more cervical screening tests in a primary care setting
March	23,500	3,255
April	22,000	0
May *estimated numbers	23,500	0
Total	69000	3255

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