



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

21 September 2020

Deputy Niamh Smyth
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ21271/20: To ask the Minister for Health the status of the full resumption of BreastCheck and cervical smear tests for those in need; if his attention has been drawn to concerns regarding the cessation of the assessments; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Smyth,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

The National Screening Service's (NSS) screening programmes, BreastCheck, CervicalCheck, BowelScreen and Diabetic RetinaScreen were paused in March 2020. This move was taken on public health advice due to the situation with COVID-19. The pause in screening was put in place to protect participants and staff by complying with social distancing guidelines. In addition, the HSE temporarily redeployed staff and resources to the response to COVID-19. However, clinical staff continued to work within the programmes. Most of our staff have now returned from redeployment.

The NSS conducted a risk assessment in March 2020, the purpose of which was to evaluate the impact of a partial or full pause of screening services for a period during the COVID-19 pandemic and management process.

The assessment saw the impact of service withdrawal for patients within the screening service as follows:

- Delayed detection and diagnosis of cancer / eye disease
- Delayed surgery and / or treatment
- Significant patient waiting times in all stages of the screening process
- Participant / patient anxiety.

It was clear from the initial analysis that a pause of screening services would have associated risks. However, on balance of guidance provided by HSE Public Health and the Department of Health, the NSS analysis of the risks and proposed mitigations supported a decision to pause screening for a period.

In June, the NSS announced a planned phased restart of its screening programmes. CervicalCheck recommenced screening at the beginning of July, and we expect BreastCheck to resume in September/October.

We are working with our host hospitals and service providers to maximise screening capacity within the constraints of COVID-19. We are working with our screening and laboratory facilities on an ongoing basis in order to minimise the impact of new processes and procedures and achieve maximum possible capacity during the managed restart of screening.

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All parts of the screening chain, from sample-taking and laboratories through to treatment (for example, colposcopy and surgery) must have access to adequate capacity, and be robust, staffed and accessible for screening to operate safely. This includes the need to have appropriate infection controls in place, and that PPE requirements are identified and made available.

The NSS must comply with all HSE & Public Health social distancing guidelines, and reduced contact, to protect patients and staff where feasible during screening. This is an important part of supporting the containment of COVID-19. Implementing the new policies and procedures required to achieve this are having an impact on capacity and activity within screening. At all stages, the screening pathways, schedules and rounds are affected.

As screening restarts, we are ensuring all parts of the system have sufficient capacity to process the volume of tests. We are taking safety measures to protect both patients and staff, such as social distancing measures and face coverings. This can mean that appointments may take longer and that it may also take longer to get an appointment. We will continue to follow public health guidelines. The health and safety of our patients and staff is our priority. The resumption of screening services is dependent on the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Screening is a population health measure for people who are presumed healthy and do not have symptoms. The aim of a population screening programme is to reduce the incidence of disease in a population. Screening is not a diagnostic tool and no screening test is completely accurate.

All screening programmes are limited by the sensitivity of the test which is the ability to detect those with the disease in a population (true positives). Screening programmes are likewise limited by the specificity of the test which is the ability to detect those who are free of the disease (true negatives). Therefore, a negative test result is not a guarantee that a person is clear of the condition, or that they won't develop the condition between screening appointments.

The NSS continues to encourage all people who are between screening appointments, or waiting for rescheduled appointments, to be aware of, and act upon, any symptoms associated with the conditions for which they are being screened. We ask that those people contact their GP, who will arrange appropriate follow-up care.

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

Fiona Murphy
Chief Executive
National Screening Service

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An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Cúc
The National Breast Screening Programme



AN CLÁR NAISIÚNTA SCAGTHÁSTÁLA CEIRBEACS
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME



An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Putóige
The National Bowel Screening Programme



An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Retiní de Dhráibéigh
The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme



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BreastCheck
An Clár Náisiúnta Scaghtástála Coik
The National Breast Screening Programme



CervicalCheck
AN CLÁR NAISIÚNTA SCAGHTÁSTÁLA CEIRBEACS
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME



BowelScreen
An Clár Náisiúnta Scaghtástála Putóige
The National Bowel Screening Programme



Diabetic RetinaScreen
An Clár Náisiúnta Scaghtástála Netíní do Diabeteigh
The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme