



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

17 September 2020

Deputy Neale Richmond
neale.richmond@oireachtas.ie

Our Ref: HM/Communications

PQ23290/20: To ask the Minister for Health the plans in place to clear the backlog of cancer screening checks that have built up due to the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

The National Screening Service's (NSS) four 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.

In June, the NSS announced a planned phased restart of its screening programmes. CervicalCheck and Diabetic RetinaScreen recommenced screening at the beginning of July. BowelScreen resumed in August. We expect BreastCheck to resume in September/October. The resumption is across all locations.

All parts of the screening chain, from sample-taking and laboratories through to treatment (for example, colposcopy and surgery) have to 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.

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.

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.

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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.

For other queries patients can call the Freephone information line on 1800 45 45 55, email info@screeningservice.ie or contact your clinic directly.

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 Coik
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 Scríonú de Dhráibéigh
The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme