



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

17 September 2020

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne
violet-anne.wynne@oireachtas.ie

Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ23412/20: To ask the Minister for Health the supports he plans to put in place to ensure adequate resources are made available that when BreastCheck screening recommences that the backlog of checks will be dealt with quickly

Dear Deputy Wynne,

I refer to the above query.

The population-based screening programme BreastCheck has been paused on public health advice since 16 March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pause in community testing was put in place to protect patients 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 have continued to work within the programme.

BreastCheck is in the final stages of planning necessary to resume screening on a phased basis in September/October. This includes:

- a structured approach to scheduling appointments
- a new process, which includes the use of new technology, for notifying women of their appointments during COVID-19
- priority invites issued to those waiting longest
- reduction in capacity for screening due to social distancing and potential staff limitations due to COVID-19
- assessing the introduction of additional units to increase capacity
- supporting symptomatic breast services in their host hospitals, providing care, diagnostics, treatment and surgery for patients referred to the symptomatic service. This work is increasing capacity for screening participants to access treatment pathways when screening resumes.

When the BreastCheck programme was temporarily paused there were approximately 600 women with screen detected abnormalities that needed assessment. All women have now been assessed and the majority of women requiring surgery have had their operations and are on a specific care pathway.

There is no international standard for the frequency of screening e.g. BreastCheck in Ireland screens more frequently than many European countries; in the UK screening is every 36 months. The pause in screening, combined with COVID-19 restrictions, means it is projected that it will take 36 months to complete the current round (screens and assessments previously completed within a 24-month period) of breast screening. Although we would not wish anyone to have a longer interval for screening in Ireland, there is no evidence that harm will accrue from a delayed screen.

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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 priority.

The resumption of screening services is dependent on ongoing restrictions due to 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.

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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