



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála  
National Screening Service

23 September 2020

Deputy John Lahart  
[john.lahart@oireachtas.ie](mailto:john.lahart@oireachtas.ie)

Our Ref: HM/Communications

**PQ24702/20: To ask the Minister for Health when the BreastCheck screening service will recommence; if his attention has been drawn to the importance of early detection of breast cancer in women over 50 years of age; his plans to deal with the backlog of appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter.**

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

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
- 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.

Women of any age can get breast cancer but the risk increases as you get older. Research shows that women aged 50 and over are at a higher risk of getting cancer. BreastCheck offers all women aged between the ages of 50 and 69 a breast cancer test (a mammogram). Research indicates that women in this age range benefit most from a breast screening programme.

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 three years. The pause in screening, combined with COVID-19 restrictions, means that it will take us some months to catch up. It is therefore projected that it will take 36 months to complete the current round (screens and assessments completed within a 24-month period) of breast screening. Although we would not wish

Teach Óstaí an Rí, 200 Sráid Parnell, Baile Átha Cliath D01 A3Y8. King's Inn House, 200 Parnell Street, Dublin 1, D01 A3Y8.  
☎ 353 1 865 9300 ✉ [info@screeningservice.ie](mailto:info@screeningservice.ie) [www.screeningservice.ie](http://www.screeningservice.ie)



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anyone to have a longer interval for screening in Ireland, there is no evidence that harm will accrue from a delayed screen.

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](mailto: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 Netim de Driabteigh  
The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme