

22 December 2021

Deputy Seán Crowe
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Our Ref: HM/Communications

PQ62615/21: To ask the Minister for Health the number of persons that are overdue for cervical screening; and the number of those that have been waiting for longer than six months.

PQ62616/21: To ask the Minister for Health the number of persons that are overdue for bowel screening; and the number of those that have been waiting for longer than six months.

PQ62617/21: To ask the Minister for Health the number of persons that are overdue BreastCheck screening; and the number of those that have been waiting for longer than six months.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above three Parliamentary Questions which I propose answering in one combined reply. I trust you are supportive of this approach.

CervicalCheck:

Despite the many restrictions COVID-19 has placed on our operations, CervicalCheck is up to date with invites for screening.

CervicalCheck is issuing letters of invitation to all participants as their screening date falls due. Each participant chooses when it is best for them to attend; they are responsible for making their appointment with their GP practice or a clinic.

BowelScreen:

BowelScreen, the HSE National Bowel Screening Programme, offers population-based bowel screening to eligible people countrywide every two years. Since 2020 BowelScreen has matched its capacity to screen with the follow-up treatment capacity of its host hospitals. As we end 2021, all BowelScreen units are scheduling screening colonoscopies. BowelScreen continues to monitor colonoscopy capacity closely and invitations to participate are being issued relative to each unit's capacity.

The impact of COVID-19 means invitations in our current screening round (where we normally invite people for screening once every two years) are delayed by up to a year. This means:

- if a person was due to be issued with a screening test kit in 2020, we aimed to issue their kit in 2021
- if they were due to be invited to be screened in 2021, we aim to invite them in 2022
- We are prioritising inviting people who have been waiting for screening longest, and new entrants to the screening programme
- BowelScreen continues to emphasise the importance of being symptom aware, and for anyone with symptoms to contact their GP who will give them appropriate advice on follow-up care.

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Most of the time bowel screening looks to detect and remove benign growths (known as polyps). Polyps are small growths that are not cancer but, if not removed, might turn into cancer over time (approximately 10 years). If polyps are found, they can be removed easily. In BowelScreen, the number of cancers detected is small (11%) and they are at very early stages. Studies during COVID-19 have so far shown that a 6-month delay in screening does not adversely affect outcomes.

BreastCheck:

BreastCheck was paused between March and end of October 2020 on Public Health advice, in order to protect participants and staff by complying with social distancing guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19. During this time, BreastCheck provided support to the symptomatic breast cancer service, assessing and treating women who were at high risk of breast cancer and whose hospital appointments has been delayed due to COVID-19. This meant that urgent patients who had symptoms were seen quicker, with the aim of improving the outcome of any diagnosis.

In early 2021, many women who were due routine screening had their invitation delayed due to unprecedented levels of virus in the community. We are pleased to say that routine breast screening is again operating nationwide, with invites being sent out to eligible women for screening appointments dated from 08 March 2021.

BreastCheck has lost nearly a year of screening time because of the COVID-19 pandemic and appointments in this screening round (where we invite women for screening once every two years) are delayed by up to a year. This means that if a woman was due to be screened in 2020, we are aiming to invite her in 2021; if she was due to be screened in 2021, we will now aim to invite her in 2022.

For a time, Ireland will be more in line with England, which screens women every three years. We aim to return to screening women every two years as soon as possible. This is dependent on the situation with COVID-19 and restrictions continuing to ease.

Our verified data shows that the number of women who had a complete mammogram from January to December 2020 was approximately 56,000. Our annual target is to screen 185,000 women in the eligible population, so we had approximately 128,000 fewer participants in 2020 than we had planned, pre-COVID.

Our target number of complete mammograms in the first eight months of 2021 was reduced in line with COVID-19 infection control measures to 63,000. Our verified data, up to end of August 2021, shows we are ahead of this target with approximately 70,000 women during this period.

Screening

The National Screening Service continues to encourage all people who are between screening appointments, or waiting for rescheduled appointments, to be aware of, and act upon, any symptoms. 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.

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An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
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