



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

03 February 2021

Deputy Neale Richmond T.D.
neale.richmond@oireachtas.ie

Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ8485/21: To ask the Minister for Health his plans to clear the BreastCheck backlog due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ8486/21: To ask the Minister for Health if the BreastCheck service is permitted to run for public health patients during level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ8487/21: To ask the Minister for Health his plans to prioritise BreastCheck appointments for Patients who had their appointments cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ8488/21: To ask the Minister for Health if he will waive the need for a general practitioner referral letter for patients who choose to get their BreastCheck appointment privately due to a cancelled appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter

PQ8489/21: To ask the Minister for Health the current length of the backlog for BreastCheck screening appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Richmond,

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

Breast screening was paused from March to October 2020 on Public Health and Government advice due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Since screening restarted we have been closely monitoring our capacity to screen and reviewing our decisions in accordance with government guidelines.

Screening during Level 5 restrictions

Whilst screening has continued during Level 5 restrictions, at the beginning of 2021, the risk to healthy women posed by unprecedented levels of COVID-19 in the community was deemed to outweigh the benefits of routine breast screening at that time. Therefore, BreastCheck operated a reduced service in January and February 2021.

With levels of the virus now dropping within the community, and the opening up of treatment pathways, routine screening is resuming. Women are now receiving invitations for routine screening from 08 March 2021.

Our clinics and mobile units are working hard to keep people safe when they go for their appointment. BreastCheck's programme of vaccination of all patient-facing staff will further

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reduce the risk to participants and staff of COVID-19 and will support the safe restart of services. Measures to ensure participant and staff safety include:

- Vaccination of front line staff, with patient-facing staff vaccinated by 8th March
- Upgraded units to meet infection control and physical distancing requirements.
- Staff use of PPE and social distancing observed in all units.
- Reduced cross-county flow of staff and participants.

Priority appointments

As screening resumes in our BreastCheck units nationwide, we are prioritising those who have waited longest for routine screening:

- Invitation letters will be sent first to those who had their appointments cancelled in January 2021
- Invitations for all other women due routine screening will follow
- Women in the assessment phase of breast screening will continue to be seen

Breast screening capacity is reduced due to social distancing and staff limitations due to COVID-19. Therefore we are asking all participants, including new entrants, to check their telephone details on the register as our new text management system is in place to maximise appointment uptake.

If women cannot make their appointments, we are asking them to let us know, so that we can rearrange their appointment and offer the slot to someone else.

Anyone who has symptoms of COVID-19 should not attend a screening appointment until they are sure that they are clear of the illness. They should visit HSE.ie for guidelines and advice.

Number of women yet to be screened

Many women who were due their screening invitation in 2020 have had their invitation delayed during the global pandemic. In 2020 we screened 128,000 fewer women than we targeted in our service plan for that year.

The NSS continues to investigate ways to increase capacity to address the longer screening times that are a factor of care in a COVID-19 environment. These include asking staff to work additional hours where possible. We note however that there is finite level of staffing resources available to healthcare worldwide, regardless of available budget.

The focus of the resumption of routine breast screening is therefore to achieve a maximum invitation rate that is compatible with a safe and controlled follow-up assessment and our treatment capacity within the health service. BreastCheck will operate at reduced capacity for the foreseeable future to ensure the safety of participants.

Private screening

BreastCheck is a population-based screening service and as such has no private screening programme.

We continue to emphasise to our participants that BreastCheck is a screening service for well women within the population age range, and is not for people with symptoms. If a woman has

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any concerns or symptoms concerning their breasts, we strongly encourage them to contact or attend their GP to ensure that they are given the appropriate advice/referral regarding a symptomatic clinic for breast symptoms, which are in operation.

We will provide updates for screening participants on www.breastcheck.ie. Women can also contact us on info@breastcheck.ie or Freephone 1800 45 45 55.

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 Meirne de Dhrabteigh
The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme