



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

16 April 2021

Deputy Peadar Tóibín
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Our Ref: HM/Communications

PQ16646/21: To ask the Minister for Health the number of persons on the waiting lists for cancer screening and cancer treatment on a national basis and by county.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

The National Screening Service does not compile this data in county format; however, we have supplied national figures for cancer screening.

BreastCheck

BreastCheck, the National Screening Service's breast screening programme, was paused between March and end of October 2020 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.

Although breast screening resumed in late October last year, in early 2021, many women who were due routine screening had their invitation delayed due to unprecedented levels of virus in the community. Our annual target is to reach 185,000 women in the eligible population who have had a complete mammogram. The number of women who had a complete mammogram year to date (January-December 2020) was 56,270 which is behind the target of 185,000 by 128,730.

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.

Since BreastCheck restarted in October, the need for comprehensive PPE and other infection-control measures has limited the capacity of the programme to screen women in a safe environment within the same timeframe pre-COVID. This can mean that appointments are taking longer and that it may also take longer to get an appointment. It is therefore projecting it will take longer to complete its two-yearly screening round (screens and assessments completed within a 24-month period).

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An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Cúc
The National Breast Screening Programme



AN CLÁR NÁISIÚNTA 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



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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. The focus of the resumption of routine screening is to achieve a maximum invitation rate that is compatible with a safe follow-up assessment and treatment capacity within the health service. It is important to note that the programme's capacity is greatly reduced by social distancing and COVID-19 infection control measures. We are asking those awaiting appointment invitations to please be patient as it is likely that it will take an additional year to complete the current round.

We continue to ask that people do not attend their appointment if they are unwell or self-isolating because they have symptoms of COVID-19. People should not attend either if they are a confirmed close contact of someone who has tested positive for coronavirus.

CervicalCheck

CervicalCheck, the National Screening Service's cervical screening programme, was paused on 30 March 2020 on Public Health and Government advice to stop the spread of COVID-19. CervicalCheck restarted screening on 06 July 2020 after a three month pause.

By the end of December 2020, we had issued a first invite letter to everyone due screening in 2020 and were reporting strong uptake rates. We issued over 270,000 invites in 2020. The number of women who had one or more smear tests in a primary care setting (January-December 2020) was 143,028 which is behind the target of 255,000 by 111,972. CervicalCheck is now issuing letters of invitation to all participants as their screening date falls due.

It is important to understand that invitations do not equal tests; many people do not make an appointment with a CervicalCheck registered sampletaker when they receive their letter.

Primary care

CervicalCheck continues to support GP practices and community clinics making individual decisions about the level of screening that is safe for them to provide, as they adhere to Government guidelines and Public Health advice about the spread of COVID-19 and participate in the vaccination programme.

We continue to ask women to keep in touch with their GP and to take the earliest appointment offered to them. We are also letting women know that they do not need to book for screening with their own GP, and can book with any sampletaker in their area. A list of registered sampletakers is available on our website here..

BowelScreen

BowelScreen, the National Screening Service's bowel screening programme, was paused on 30 March 2020 on Public Health and Government advice to stop the spread of COVID-19. BowelScreen restarted screening in August 2020 after a four month pause.

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We are working with host hospitals to maximise the volume of follow-up procedures they can accommodate safely during COVID-19.

Almost 50,000 people have completed a satisfactory BowelScreen FIT test (January-December 2020). This is behind the target of 125,000 by 75,000 participants.

BowelScreen will continue to respond appropriately to the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of the programme in support of the endoscopy units in conjunction with the National Endoscopy Programme.

Screening is a population health measure for people who are presumed healthy and do not have symptoms. The NSS continues to encourage all people who are between screening appointments, or waiting for rescheduled appointments, to be aware of any symptoms they may develop. We ask that those people contact their GP, who will arrange appropriate follow-up care.

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

The National Cancer Control Programme does not collect data or have access to data on waiting lists for cancer treatments. The impact of the COVID-19 outbreak adversely impacted all health services, including cancer services, raising serious concerns and challenges.

Extensive efforts to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on cancer diagnosis and treatment in Ireland are ongoing. Public awareness campaigns on the importance of seeking healthcare were undertaken throughout 2020, encouraging people concerned about possible signs or symptoms of cancer to contact their GP in a timely manner.

Efforts to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on cancer services have been challenged by the third wave of the pandemic in early 2021. The third wave has resulted in significant pressure on the acute services, with the highest rates of COVID related hospitalisations and ICU admissions observed in Ireland over the course of the pandemic to date. Additional challenges have included staff shortages due to staff being identified as cases or close contacts of COVID-19. This has severely impacted capacity for non-COVID healthcare, including cancer care, and has necessitated service reconfiguration (including provision of care through the private hospitals) and rationalisation (including cancellation/postponement of non-urgent care).

We are committed to continue to screen as many people as possible within the constraints of the healthcare environment in 2021.

I trust this information is of assistance to you, but should you have any further queries please contact me.

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Diabetic RetinaScreen
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Scríon de Dhráibéig
The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme



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Fiona Murphy
Chief Executive
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