

18 November 2021

Deputy Peadar Tóibín TD
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ54619.21: To ask the Minister for Health the number of persons who attended BreastCheck clinics in each of the past five years and to date in 2021.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

The number of women who were screened in BreastCheck clinics 2015-2020 and 01 January to 31 August 2021 can be seen in the following table.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Jan-Aug 2021
Number of women screened	144,682	141,878	164,187	170,583	170,957	56,270	70,875*

***Please note that data for 2021 is not complete. Validated data for 2021 is only available up to the end of August 2021.**

BreastCheck, the National Screening Service's population health breast screening programme, was paused between March and end of October 2020, and again between January and March 2021, following Government and Public Health advice to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

The pause was put in place to protect patients and staff by complying with social distancing guidelines. It is a principle of screening that it must achieve a balance of benefits and potential harms. Inviting well women – many of whom were in the COVID-vulnerable age category - into a high-risk environment tipped the balance of harms against screening during this period.

While screening was paused, BreastCheck redeployed services to assist acute hospital services in managing their waiting lists of women with symptoms. This temporary redeployment of BreastCheck resources enabled high-risk patients with symptoms to be seen quicker, with the aim of improving the outcome of any diagnosis during a time when breast health resources were constrained.

Similar to other breast screening programmes internationally we have restarted women on their screening journeys since recommencing screening. However, appointments in this screening round 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. We are prioritising women who are due screening longest and women who are new to screening.

During this time, Ireland will be in line with England, which screens women every three years. However, 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.

To alleviate pressure on the existing system and to increase capacity, our clinics and mobile screening units are working hard to screen as many people as possible while adhering to COVID-19 safety protocols. Measures include:

- Completed staff vaccination programme
- Mobile vans and static units upgraded to meet infection control and physical distancing requirements.
- Staff use of PPE and social distancing observed in both static and mobile units.
- New text messaging system to manage appointments

At all times we have advised women and continue to do so, that screening is for healthy women. If a woman is experiencing breast symptoms, she should contact her GP without delay for assessment and if necessary referral to the symptomatic breast cancer services.

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

