



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

24 February 2021

Deputy Thomas Pringle
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Our Ref: EH/Communications

PQ7186/22: To ask the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that appointments for the BreastCheck programme are currently up to a year behind schedule; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ7187/22: To ask the Minister for Health the actions he is taking to reduce the delays in appointments for the BreastCheck programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the two Parliamentary Questions above, which I intend to answer as one. I trust you are agreeable with this approach.

Pauses in breast screening in 2020 and 2021

BreastCheck, the national breast screening programme, was paused between March and end of October 2020, and again between January and March 2021. The programme was paused in order to protect participants and staff by complying with social distancing guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Since March 2021, breast screening services have been operating nationwide.

During the pause in breast screening services, BreastCheck staff were temporarily redeployed into symptomatic and other services, including the response to COVID-19. Support was provided to assess and treat women who were at high risk of breast cancer, and whose hospital appointments had been delayed because of COVID-19.

This temporary redeployment of services enabled high-risk patients who had symptoms to be seen quicker, with the aim of improving the outcome of any diagnosis during a time when breast health resources were constrained. This cohort of symptomatic women has been shown to have a significantly higher rate of cancer, and more time-dependent diagnosis, than the screened cohort.

The pause in screening, along with COVID-19 infection control measures, which affect our capacity to screen, mean that women are waiting longer for their screening appointments.

We have lost nearly a year of screening time because of the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 2021, we will now aim to invite her in 2022.

Actions to increase uptake in the BreastCheck programme

In line with new UK research on maximising the effectiveness of breast screening programmes following the pandemic, BreastCheck is focusing in the first instance on increasing uptake of screening in the post-pandemic period. Research indicates that this is a more effective strategy for increasing detection rates than focusing on reducing the time between screenings. You can read more about this research by clicking [here](#).

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This means that for a time, Ireland will be more 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.

We are prioritising uptake in women who are due screening longest and women who are new to screening. In our communications and campaigns work, and through our Equity Strategy, we are also focusing on increasing uptake in groups of women least likely to come for screening, and therefore at higher risk of cancer.

Our focus on increasing uptake includes:

- We have funded a text messaging system to support infection control and improve uptake so that more women may avail of breast screening
- We have funded a large-scale communications campaign which informs women of the action they can take to ensure every appointment slot is filled – focusing on increase uptake and maximising capacity.
- We have funded three new, fully kitted out BreastCheck mobile units, which will have the effect of increasing capacity to drive uptake.
- We are actively recruiting radiography and radiology staff, while noting that staff recruitment remains a global challenge in these specialities. For example, in breast screening, it takes up to 15 years to train a radiologist and 10 years to train a radiographer.
- We have created new easy-read leaflets and funded a suite of multilingual videos in migrant languages to explain to women in these communities the screening options available to them.
- We are working with Traveller advocacy groups to increase uptake of breast screening for women in the Traveller community.
- We are working with NCCP to create new information for women in the screened population on reducing their risk of cancer through prevention and early detection.

Our action in communicating to women in the screened population

The NSS has been keen to communicate when women could expect their appointment, as quickly and effectively as possible.

- From September to November 2021, we ran a large advertising campaign on digital, social and national print media, and on national radio. This period included Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Advertisements highlighted the delay in screening and gave advice on what women in the screened population could do to reduce their personal risk of breast cancer. Social media advertising is continuing this year.
- We regularly update our stakeholders and partners, such as the Irish Cancer Society and Marie Keating Foundation, on the status of routine screening for well women.
- We have created new printed materials for and posters women attending our services.
- We continue to update our website, www.breastcheck.ie on the status of routine screening for well women and on appointments for women in the assessment phase of screening.

What women can do

Screening is a population health measure for healthy women who do not have symptoms. A pillar of our national advertising campaign in autumn 2021 was to inform women of the things they can do to reduce their personal risk of breast cancer, and aid early detection. This continues to be a feature of our information campaigns in 2022, as follows:



Prevention

British studies have shown that around 1 in 4 cases of breast cancer could be prevented through changes to lifestyle (smoking and alcohol) and environmental factors (chemicals and pollution). Many different things influence a woman's chance (risk) of getting breast cancer. Some of these things we cannot change, such as age, family history and breast density, but some we can. Lifestyle factors are amongst the things women can choose to change to reduce their risk of breast cancer. These include stopping smoking and cutting down on alcohol, maintaining a healthy weight and getting enough exercise.

Medications such as the oral contraceptive pill and some forms of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) may in some cases increase a woman's risk of breast cancer, while choosing to breastfeed can reduce your risk of developing breast cancer.

Early detection

We continue to emphasise to our participants that BreastCheck is a screening service for well women within the population age range (50-69 years) and is not for women with symptoms. If a person has any concerns or symptoms concerning their breasts, they should not attend screening and should instead contact their GP who will give them the appropriate advice.

It is important that every woman is breast aware. This means knowing what is normal for women so that if any unusual change occurs, they will recognise it. The sooner they notice a change the better because if cancer is found early, treatment is more likely to be successful. It is important for women to get into the habit of looking at and feeling their breasts at least on a monthly basis. More information on techniques for checking your breasts is available on breastcheck.ie.

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

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

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Murphy
Chief Executive
National Screening Service

