



7 July 2022

Deputy David Cullinane
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ33161.22: To ask the Minister for Health the level of colonoscopy capacity per hospital group used by the BowelScreen programme, the estimated level of colonoscopy capacity per hospital group in order to meet the Programme for Government commitment to extend the BowelScreen programme to all persons aged 55-75 years of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

Age range extension

BowelScreen - the national bowel screening programme, invites men and women aged 60 to 69 for bowel screening every two years. The Health Information and Quality Authority's health technology assessment recommended that bowel screening in Ireland should in future encompass the 55-74 year age range.

We understand the importance of screening these younger and older age groups. We are planning to begin expanding screening gradually, to offer bowel screening to all people aged 55 to 74. This is part of our commitment in Ireland's *National Cancer Strategy, 2017-2026*.

Unfortunately, the COVID pandemic did have an impact on BowelScreen. Our screening colonoscopy units had to stop doing colonoscopies as staff were redeployed to assist with the national effort against the pandemic.

As of 2022 all our screening colonoscopy units are again doing colonoscopies for people whose screening test has shown them to be at risk. But the overall continuing impact of COVID-19 means that screening invitations are being delayed by approximately a year. This means we will have to expand the programme a little slower than we would like. You can read more about this [here](#).

Colonoscopy capacity

BowelScreen's latest published [programme report](#), which covers 2018 and 2019, shows the total number of eligible people who were invited for bowel screening during this period was 534,926.

The current requirement for the eligible screening population (aged 60-69 years) is around 7,000 colonoscopies per year. This is based on a 50% uptake of screening invitations.

When the age range extension is complete, we estimate that the population eligible for bowel screening will double in size. We estimate the colonoscopy capacity requirement will also double in size, equating to 14,000 colonoscopies per year*.

While we do not hold the data for the total colonoscopy capacity across all hospital groups, BowelScreen estimates that 4-5% of the total number of colonoscopies delivered nationally each year are carried out for screened patients. The rest are done for symptomatic patients.

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The following table shows an estimated distribution of the eligible screening population, as assigned to each hospital group. As our age range extension project progresses, each hospital group will need to build capacity in line with its share of the total screening population. As bowel screening is a preventative health measure that reduces your risk of developing cancer in the future, this capacity planning may also account for any reduction in colonoscopy requirement from symptomatic services, due to the bowel screening extension.

Hospital group	Estimated distribution by hospital group
Ireland East Hospital Group	26%
RCSI Hospital Group	12%
Dublin Midlands Hospital Group	13%
South/Southwest Hospital Group	22%
Saolta University Healthcare Group	21%
University of Limerick Hospital Group	6%

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic we have faced a considerable challenge in managing our current age cohort within capacity constraints. We envisage that this will continue for some time. We are working with our endoscopy units to maximise available capacity for screened patients, and looking at ways to extend capacity for screened patients into the longer-term.

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

** This estimate is based on population numbers by county and age from the 2016 census data. We will update our estimates when we receive the 2022 census data. We expect this to be in early 2023.*