



13 April 2023

Deputy Peter Burke TD
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ15341.23: To ask the Minister for Health when the BreastCheck programme for 52 and 53 year olds who were never called for their initial BreastCheck appointments, due to Covid restrictions at the time, will be rescheduled; the processes that are in place to address this backlog; the information that has been communicated to this cohort to update them; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

BreastCheck screening locations

BreastCheck invites eligible women aged from 50 to 69 years, for breast screening on an area-by-area basis every two years. We call this process a screening 'round'.

There are four regional centres responsible for the delivery of BreastCheck throughout the country: Eccles Street and Merrion Road in Dublin; Newcastle Road in Galway; and Infirmary Road in Cork. However, not all eligible women wish, or are able, to travel to one of these regional units. An important principle for the BreastCheck programme is to offer screening services locally to women in counties and locations convenient to where they live. To achieve this, each of the four screening units operates in tandem with mobile units. The majority of women participating in BreastCheck have their mammogram in one of these units.

We have 24 mobile units, three of which are new in the last two years. The units move around over the course of each screening round depending on the size of the population that is eligible for screening in each area. We update our breast screening locations regularly on our website, [here](#).

Impact of COVID-19 on breast screening

Along with many public services, BreastCheck was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme was paused for several months in 2020 and 2021, and because of this, it is taking longer to get through the current screening round. These delays affected not only new entrants to the screening programme (women aged 50-52), but also women who have been screened previously.

Despite the ongoing challenges in recruitment and retention of staff, and COVID-19 related absences, BreastCheck is back to nearly normal numbers attending for screening. We aim to return to two-yearly screens by autumn this year. This is dependent on meeting the continued challenge of staff recruitment and retention.

First invitation for screening

Our BreastCheck mobile units stay in one location until all eligible women who are in the catchment area for that mobile unit have been invited. A woman's first invitation will depend on when screening is next available in her area. This is normally within two years of her 50th

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birthday. However, owing to delays caused by COVID-19 and staff recruitment, a woman may be 53 when she receives her first invitation.

Communicating with women nationally through regular updates

We ran multiple large-scale national communications campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic to inform women that screening invitations had been delayed and when they could expect to be invited for screening.

We communicated that screening was for women who were presumed well and encouraged them to be aware of symptoms. If they had symptoms, we informed them that they should not wait for screening but should contact their GP who would discuss with them the appropriate follow-up care.

Our campaigns ran across national press, radio and television, on social and digital media, and our messages were carried on our HSE website, *breastcheck.ie* and on [our Facebook page](#). We informed women aged 50-69:

- when they could be expected to be invited for screening
- the importance of attending screening when invited, to ensure every appointment slot was filled and we could screen the maximum number of women possible
- COVID-19 measures in place at screening locations
- the importance of being breast aware
- prevention and early detection of breast cancer and how women in the screening age range can reduce their own personal risk of breast cancer
- the benefits and limitations of screening
- encouraging women to contact a GP if they have breast cancer symptoms.
- How to check for updates on screening via www.breastcheck.ie, through info@breastcheck.ie, and our Freephone line 1800 45 45 55.

We know through our research that GPs and practice nurses are the most trusted source of healthcare information for women. Therefore, we also completed largescale communications to GPs and practice nurses nationwide via regular stakeholder updates; and the ICGP webinar series to inform GPs about appointment delays, and when women could expect to be next invited for screening. We also provided regular updates to patient advocacy groups such as the Irish Cancer Society and Marie Keating Foundation.

In addition, we put in place a new text messaging system to ensure we make maximum use of our screening capacity. We send attendance reminders to women a few days before their appointment, including information on actions to take to ensure every appointment slot is filled.

I trust this information is of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Murphy
Chief Executive