



11 April 2023

Deputy Johnny Guirke
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Our Ref: HM/Communications

PQ15583/23: To ask the Minister for Health to indicate any measures being taken to ensure BowelScreen participation rates reach 60% compliance (2020 target date), as per the National Cancer Strategy targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ15585/23: To ask the Minister for Health the number of individuals who received an invitation to take part in the BowelScreen on a quarterly basis from Q1 2020 and to date in 2023; the percentage of individuals who accepted an invitation and subsequently attended a screening appointment in each of the specified months; and if he will provide that information in tabular form.

Dear Deputy,

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

People are eligible to take part in the BowelScreen programme once they reach the age of 60. Once the person gives consent they are issued with a FIT kit (screening) which is a test done at home and returned by post at their convenience.

Colorectal cancer screening is a preventative health measure. The primary objective of BowelScreen is to reduce people's risk of developing bowel cancer in the future, by detecting and removing pre-cancerous adenomas in the lining of the bowel. Also, if bowel cancer is found early through bowel screening, it's easier to treat and there's a better chance of recovery.

BowelScreen was paused between March and August 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. During COVID-19 restrictions, endoscopy services did not operate at full capacity and some people's invitations for screening have been delayed by up to a year. The programme issued invitations on the basis of capacity and do not hold a waiting list.

BowelScreen participation rates

The percentage uptake rate for BowelScreen screening population from January to December 2022 is 43.2%. This is a provisional figure and subject to change.

Increasing uptake rates for bowel cancer screening is a key focus of the National Screening Service. In 2021 we completed a large-scale public attitudes survey to understand people's attitudes to screening, the barriers to and enablers for people to take up their screening invitation. We have created an action plan to increase knowledge and understanding of screening, with the aim of reducing some of the barriers to screening participation and increasing uptake rates. The results of the survey are [here](#).

We are also working on an Equity Strategy to reduce inequity in screening and ensure that every step of the screening journey, from invitation to treatment, is accessible. We know that socially excluded groups are less likely to participate in screening services. This may be because they find it difficult to engage with health services, or that we have communicated with

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them in a way that isn't easily understood by them. We are researching ways to help us understand what we need to improve. You can read more about our Equity strategy [here](#).

Some of our actions to reduce barriers to participation and increase uptake include:

- Large scale communications campaign in Oct / Nov 2022 and in April 2023 for bowel cancer awareness month running across press, radio, digital and social media with partner pack for our screening partners
- Research to understand the patient experience
- New communications materials including a new modular animated video has been created to explain BowelScreen and how to do the home test.

BowelScreen invitations

The following table shows the number of eligible BowelScreen participants invited in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022; and the percentage of those who were screened. We hold this data yearly not quarterly. It also shows the percentage of BowelScreen invitees screened. BowelScreen was paused between March and August 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. We restarted issuing invites for screening to eligible people on a phased basis in August 2020.

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of BowelScreen participants invited	285,083	132,472	167,480	302,978
BowelScreen invitees screened (%)	43.0	42.4	49.6	43.3*

*Figure may change as reminder/DNA appointments issued. 2023 data is not yet validated.

Screening

We continue to emphasise the importance of being symptom aware for all of our screening services. We encourage anyone with symptoms to contact their GP who will give them appropriate advice on follow-up care.

For other queries, programme participants can call the Freephone information line on 1800 45 45 55; email: info@bowelscreen.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