



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

03 February 2025

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue
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Our Ref: ÁC/Communications

PQ5501/25: To ask the Minister for Health if she will undertake a review of the current BreastCheck screening process to consider extending the BreastCheck programme to both younger women, and those beyond the age of 70 years; if she will provide an update on the backlog of screening times for BreastCheck national breast cancer screening programme; and the steps being taken to deal with the backlog.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

I note the Minister for Health's response on 18 February 2025 to your question regarding the extension of the BreastCheck age range. All screening programmes are dynamic and responsive to change, and all changes to population screening programmes must first be approved by the National Screening Advisory Committee (NSAC) on the basis of an evidence review. This independent committee makes recommendations to the Minister for Health and the Department of Health. We have asked the committee to review international evidence on the benefits and harms in screening women aged 46-49 and aged 70-75. We await the committee's recommendation on whether it is advisable to offer screening to women in these age ranges.

About BreastCheck

BreastCheck is Ireland's free breast screening programme. We screen women who have no symptoms of breast cancer so that we can find and treat breast cancer at the earliest possible stage. We aim to invite women for their first screening test by the age of 52 - in some cases it will be 53; and every two to three years after that, up to the age of 69. We provide access to appropriate care for those who need further tests and treatment. We work to make BreastCheck services accessible to all; for example, providing longer or group appointments, and information in braille and international languages.

We have four BreastCheck static screening units and 24 mobile clinics across the country.

Mobile clinics enable us to provide breast screening for more women across the country. They typically stay at a location for between three months and two years and we invite eligible women living in the area for screening. The units then move to another location, where we invite eligible women in that area. We work to ensure that no unit is sitting idle for periods of time and that all women in Ireland have an equal and equitable opportunity to attend screening close to where they live.

BreastCheck operations

As outlined above, we aim to screen women every two to three years and to invite women for their first screening text by the age of 52, though in some cases women may be 53 when they

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receive their first invites.

Our times between screenings reflects the impact of a number of factors, including the loss of almost a year of screening time in 2020 and 2021. The pauses and the resumption of screening in 2021 under COVID-19 restrictions meant that it took closer to three years rather than the normal two years to screen women due to attend breast screening during the period. The loss of screening time continues to impact the timing of our screening invitations.

Our times between screenings are also impacted by our increasing eligible population. According to 2022 Census data, 2022 was the first time in 171 years that Ireland's population exceeded five million people. Ireland's population is also ageing, with 40.6% of people aged 45 or over in 2023. This means that with every year, an increasing number of women in Ireland become eligible for BreastCheck.

In addition, BreastCheck is operating against the backdrop of an ongoing global shortage of radiology and radiography staff.

Addressing operational challenges

We are working hard to maximise our capacity and position BreastCheck for the future.

- **Recruitment:** Since January 2023, we have recruited 9 consultants and 18 radiographers. We received approval to backfill a number of critical replacement posts during the 2024 HSE recruitment embargo. While the HSE Pay and Numbers Strategy reduced the number of whole time equivalents approved for BreastCheck, we sought and secured approval for an increase in our ceiling for consultants and radiographer posts.
- **Infrastructure:** We have introduced three additional mobile units since 2020 and we are researching introducing further units in line with funding and our available clinical staffing.
- **Information technology:** In 2024, we introduced a modernised patient database system for BreastCheck. This new system aims to simplify and streamline workflows, allowing our BreastCheck teams to focus more on direct patient care. With the system, we can access real-time data to track each screening participant's journey and address any gaps in service delivery.
- **Maximising capacity:** One of our objectives is to increase screening uptake rates and to reduce missed or cancelled appointments. We have implemented a new text messaging system which provides attendance reminders to women, enabling us to work together to ensure every appointment slot is filled.
- **Equity:** We provide materials in various formats to ensure that people have access to information that will help them make informed decisions about screening. We have [information videos available in 25 languages](#) and EasyRead, plain English, and photo story [resources](#).

We would appreciate your support in promoting the availability of the free screening programmes through your communications channels and encouraging women to choose screening when invited.

Being breast aware

BreastCheck is a screening service for women aged 50-69 who do not have symptoms of breast cancer. Women with concerns or symptoms concerning their breast health should not

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wait for or 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 her so that if any unusual change occurs, she will recognise it. If cancer is found early, treatment is more likely to be successful. It is therefore important for women to get into the habit of looking at and checking their breasts at least on a monthly basis. More information on checking breasts, and on how a woman can reduce her risk of breast cancer, is available on hse.ie/breastcheck.

Women who have additional questions regarding breast screening can contact Freephone 1800 45 45 55 from 9am-6pm, Monday to Friday; or email info@breastcheck.ie.

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Murphy,
Chief Executive.

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