



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

16 October 2025

Deputy Claire Kerrane
Claire.Kerrane@oireachtas.ie

Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ55422.25: To ask the Minister for Health to outline the alternative screening available to those who are unable to undergo breast screening by mammogram; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

PQ55424.25: To ask the Minister for Health in relation to breast screening, to outline the circumstances in which MRI or targeted ultrasound are available instead of mammogram; if such alternatives may be made more widely available; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Questions. I propose to answer them together and trust that you are happy with that approach.

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 have four regional BreastCheck centres: two in Dublin, one in Cork, and one in Galway, and 24 mobile units that move between 54 locations across the country. All were accredited in 2025 to the highest quality standard by BreastCheck recently received [re-certification from the European Reference Organisation \(EUREF\)](#) for Quality Assured Breast Screening and Diagnostic Services. Level 4 is the highest level of accreditation and provides independent external reassurance of the high quality of our BreastCheck programme. Women who choose screening can be confident in this external reassurance that we continue to deliver the highest standards in breast cancer screening.

BreastCheck uses a mammogram (an x-ray of a woman's breasts) to help find breast cancer when it is too small to see or feel. In 2008, we became the world's first national breast screening programme to fully adopt modern digital mammography, and this has substantially improved breast cancer detection rates.

On average there are about 3,365 cases of breast cancer diagnosed in Ireland each year and BreastCheck can detect about one third of all these cases. The rest are detected by the symptomatic service. You can read about BreastCheck's performance in our annual [statistical reports](#), and [data reports](#) that are published quarterly.

Teach Óstaí an Rí, 200 Sráid Parnell, Baile Átha Cliath D01 A3Y8. King's Inn House, 200 Parnell Street, Dublin 1, D01 A3Y8.
☎ 353 1 865 9300 ✉ info@screeningservice.ie www.screeningservice.ie



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Support for women to access breast screening

We recognise that screening is not possible for everyone. Sometimes it is not possible when:

- the screening test physical requirements are too difficult, for example, a person cannot hold up their head and lift their arms during a mammogram
- the unfamiliar setting causes anxiety
- the person has difficulties with intimate examinations
- the person is approaching end of life.

If a woman needs more support for a breast screen, she can bring someone to her appointment for help and support. We ask women to call us in advance using the phone number on the invitation letter, or email access@breastcheck.ie.

Accessible parking is available close to all our static screening units, and we aim to locate our mobile units in places that have accessible parking. Again, women can call the number on their invitation letter to check if there is accessible parking at the mobile unit. All our mobile units have wheelchair lifts, making screening more accessible.

All our units have loop systems for people with hearing aids. We ask women to let us know if they need a sign language interpreter, a language interpreter, or information in braille.

Alternatives to mammogram in breast screening

We take our best practice guidance on how to carry out population breast screening from the European Commission Initiative on Breast Cancer (ECIBC), and its Guidelines Development Group (GDG), which is a group of experts in all aspects of screening. This EU body does not currently recommend doing alternative tests such as MRI or ultrasound as the primary screening test in organised population-based breast screening programmes, due to limited evidence of improved outcomes. Approximately one in 20 women are called for further assessment if the radiologist sees something of concern on a mammogram. This assessment can involve ultrasound and/or MRI.

BreastCheck saves lives

We know from research that BreastCheck saves lives. Over the past 25 years, we have contributed to a reduction in the number of deaths from breast cancer, with data showing a 43% reduction in mortality rates in the screened population between 2000 and 2019.

We will continue to look at the best evidence available to improve screening outcomes for women. As technology improves and more data and research become available, approaches to breast cancer screening may evolve.

Any changes to population screening programmes must first be approved by the National Screening Advisory Committee (NSAC) based on an evidence review. This independent committee makes recommendations to the Minister for Health and the Department of Health.

Being breast aware

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

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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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