



07 November 2024

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan
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Our Ref: AC/Communications

PQ 43307/24: To ask the Minister for Health to detail the existing clinical recommendations in respect of Bowel Screening, i.e., what ages should we be screening and what age groups we are screening; and the cost of extending the bowel screen programme to meet the existing clinical guidance.

PQ 43309/24: To ask the Minister for Health to detail the existing clinical guidance for BreastCheck screening.

Dear Deputy,

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

About clinical recommendations and guidelines

Quality Assurance (QA) is an integral part of the delivery of population-based screening programmes and our standards for quality assurance set out the clinical standards for each programme and provide a framework to assure that the standards are met. Further information on our QA framework is available on our [website](#).

[Standards for Quality Assurance in Colorectal Screening](#) sets out the quality standards and requirements against which our BowelScreen programme is measured including administration, the faecal immunochemical test (FIT), endoscopy, radiology, histopathology and treatment. The BowelScreen Clinical Advisory Group sets these quality standards and makes recommendations to the BowelScreen Executive Management Team on clinical pathways and protocols in the programme.

[Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Mammography Screening](#) is the relevant clinical guidance for the BreastCheck programme. It includes standards across the entire screening pathway: client care; radiography; radiology; pathology; surgery; physics; epidemiology and breast care nursing.

BowelScreen age eligibility

BowelScreen began in 2012 by offering screening to men and women aged 60 to 69. In 2023 we began expanding this age range, by inviting people aged 59 for screening. This is the first stage of our plans to expand the age range of bowel screening to people aged 55 to 74.

We are expanding our age range in line with our funding allocation and available endoscopy capacity. We are expanding gradually because we want to make sure everyone who does the screening test continues to have access to onward testing and treatment, if it's found to be needed.

Budget 2025 has allocated funding to support continued age expansion during 2025. We anticipate €1.9 million funding in 2025, and €3.8 million in 2026 which will enable us to widen

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the age range of bowel screening by two years to 58 to 70.

In tandem with the funding for age expansion, we are working with colleagues in the HSE Endoscopy Programme to make sure we have access to the endoscopy services we need to enable us to expand bowel screening to more people.

The role of the National Screening Advisory Committee

Clinical Advisory Groups for BowelScreen and BreastCheck provide support for the ongoing clinical development of screening programmes. This includes ongoing monitoring of international best practice and providing medical policy and clinical advice to the programme Executive Management Teams.

All screening programmes are dynamic, and part of our role is to monitor evidence and practice and respond when the evidence is sufficient to warrant change. We continue to keep evidence for changes to screening under review.

However, any changes to screening programme, including to the eligible age range, must be recommended by the [National Screening Advisory Committee](#) (NSAC) which is an independent committee that advises the Minister and Department of Health on all new proposals for population-based screening programmes and revisions to existing programmes.

NSAC is examining proposals in relation to both BowelScreen and BreastCheck:

- To widen the age range eligibility of the BowelScreen programme to 50 to 74 years. This year, following a request from the Committee, the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) commenced work on a health technology assessment (HTA) of extending BowelScreen to people aged 50 to 54 years.
- To widen the age range eligibility of the BreastCheck programme to 45 to 74 years (from the current age range of 50 to 69 years) and to introduce a standardised Breast Density notification for all participants. The Committee has asked HIQA to examine the evidence for this proposal.

If NSAC makes a recommendation to the Minister for Health to introduce a new programme or revise an existing programme, we begin the business planning process that will signal the implementation of the new programme or programme modification.

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.