

Exploring the case for breast screening in women under 50 years

The Irish Cancer Society has examined the case for breast cancer screening to be rolled out to women under 50 years. International and Irish evidence demonstrates that there is no case at this time, to support a shift in the current approach to breast cancer screening, which is to screen those aged 50-64 and then to invite women aged 65-69.

We must prioritise the deliverance of screening for the older age brackets first because the incidence of breast cancer is highest amongst this group. However, we constantly review the evidence base for screening women under 50 years.

International Evidence

- The EU Advisory Committee on Cancer Prevention found that population screening in women aged 40-49, the benefits did not outweigh the risks (2000);
- The World Health Organisation's International Agency Research on Cancer found that screening results in a 35% reduction in mortality from breast cancer for women aged 50-69 (2002): for every 500 mammograms, 1 life is saved;
- UK data shows that in women aged 40-49, more than 1900 would have to be screened every year for 10 years to save one life (2009);
- A recent Swedish study reported that more than 1,200 women in their 40s would need to be screened to detect just one cancer case;
- At present whilst controversial, most of the evidence shows that the benefits of breast screening for women aged 40-49, do not outweigh the costs.

Potential Harmful Effects of Screening

- False positives are common with mammography causing anxiety and leads to additional imaging, biopsies and fine needle aspiration;
- *"Of those women attending for regular screening, 23% had at least one 'false positive' screen, resulting in a recall for further assessment at which no cancer was detailed. This percentage is higher than that estimated for women aged >50". Mammography in the under 50s - 'Age' trial results, UK, 2006*
- Over diagnosis can occur in younger women of DCIS or other tumours that would not have become invasive cancers.

Breast Cancer in Ireland

- Figures from the National Cancer Research Institute (NCRI) show that the incidence of breast cancer is highest amongst the 50-59 age group, followed by the 60-69 cohort and next the 40-49 age group
- CSO mortality data shows that a greater number of older women are dying from breast cancer than younger women.

Deaths registered classified by cause and age group - Breast Cancer

	Total	Under 44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75-84	85 & over
2008*	739	49	128	163	153	139	107
2007*	629	41	90	136	140	141	81
2006	678**	53	95	143	148	148	100
2005	696**	48	89	139	162	167	94

*provisional figures for year end summary Includes both males and females

** total figures relate to females only however age breakdown relates to both genders

CSO website Feb 2010

- BreastCheck currently invites women aged 50-64 years for free screening every two years and a recent report on breast screening by HIQA (Jan 2010) recommended extension of this age range to include women aged 65-69 years. The Irish Society continues to call on Government to deliver this as a priority.

Conclusions

- The negative impact of population based screening on women aged 40-49 outweighs the negligible benefit;
- Survival data does not support a shift from the current policy which is to provide breast cancer screening to women aged 50-64 and next roll it out to those aged 65-69. This is fair and evidence based;
- Screening for women under 50 will cause greater anxiety, the need for unnecessary follow up and increased exposure to the harmful effects of radiation;
- Consideration should be given to how to best encourage the early detection amongst younger women without prompting a population fear or anxiety;
- Since the restructuring of the Breast Cancer Service and the provision of Breast Symptomatic Services, we've seen the detection rate for breast cancer change from 1 in 10 to 1 in 30. This demonstrates that women observing a change in their breast or who have a concern, are presenting themselves to their GPs. A continued commitment to breast awareness in the absence of population screening will assist in the early detection of breast cancer.

The Irish Cancer Society will not therefore be calling for breast cancer screening in young women aged 40-49 in advance of having screening in place for those aged 65-69 available nationwide.

We will however, continue to monitor the evidence and will act accordingly should it point to a new direction and where there is an international consensus.