

Protocol for a Health Technology Assessment of including breast density within the BreastCheck screening pathway

What is BreastCheck?

BreastCheck is Ireland's breast cancer screening programme. Screening aims to detect cancer earlier in people without symptoms. This can allow earlier treatment and reduce illness and death from breast cancer.

What is breast density?

Breast density refers to how much fibroglandular (dense) tissue there is compared with adipose (fatty) tissue. Breast density changes over time and is usually higher in younger women.



Why are we doing this assessment?

The National Screening Advisory Committee (NSAC) received submissions relating to modification of the BreastCheck programme to take breast density into account during screening.

NSAC requested HIQA to examine the evidence on this topic.

Why does breast density matter in screening?

Higher breast density is a risk factor for breast cancer and can also make breast tumours harder to detect on a mammogram.

Women with dense breasts could potentially be offered additional screening tests, such as digital breast tomosynthesis, MRI, contrast enhanced mammography, or ultrasound.

What will this assessment look at?

There is growing interest in whether breast cancer screening programmes should be modified to take breast density into account. In Ireland, this could include measuring breast density as part of BreastCheck mammograms and notifying women of their breast density. It could also include offering alternative pathways to those with high breast density.

This assessment will review the epidemiology of breast density, and the technology, clinical effectiveness and safety, and ethical, patient and social considerations relating to screening pathways that take account of breast density.

