

Patient Panel into Cancer Screening Programmes

With North East London Cancer Alliance



Cancer Screenings

We held a Patient Panel on Cancer Screenings with Caroline Cook, the Early Diagnosis Programme Lead at the North East London Cancer Alliance. We learnt all about the three NHS Cancer Screening programmes, for Bowel, Breast and Cervical cancers. It was a great opportunity to understand how important preventative cancer screenings are, and how and where to access them. Important discussions also came up when talking about the difference between screening programmes and diagnostic testing and the barriers towards accessing screenings.

Why do we screen?

Screening for certain types of cancers can identify if you have cancer early before you have any symptoms. When diagnosed early for cancer it is easier to treat and treatment options can be less invasive, quality of life during treatment is higher and you can have better outcomes.

Screening Programmes

There are three cancer screening programmes in the UK, including bowel, breast and cervical. Cancer screening is free of charge however you must be eligible for screenings and be registered with a GP.

Bowel Cancer Screening

You will be eligible for screening if you are

- Aged between 54 and 74 (from 2025, the age will be reduced to 50)

After 74 you will need to request a screening kit if you would like to be involved in the programme.

If you are eligible or request a screening kit, a home test kit (FIT test) will be sent to you every two years. Fit tests are able to detect small amounts of blood in poo which you may then be called for further testing. The tests are easy and hygienic to complete at home with full instructions included in all tests and videos can be found online. The test comes with a free postage packet to return the sample to be tested. You will usually have your results within two weeks and about 2 percent of samples will need to be followed up with further testing. If you have a follow up, this will be initially be with a specialist screening practitioner. You may then need a colonoscopy to confirm a diagnosis of cancer or determine if is a different condition.

Breast Cancer Screening

You will be eligible for screening if you are

- A woman aged between 50 and 71
- Transgender or non-binary person who has not had top surgery
- Transgender person who has been taking feminising hormones for two years

People over the age of 71 will need to request a breast screening if they would like to be a part of the programme, as they will not be called automatically. If you are eligible or have requested to be a part of the programme, you will be recalled to participate in the programme every three years.

How do they screen for breast cancer?

Breast screening is an x-ray of the breasts, this is called a mammogram. Two x-rays are taken of each breast by a female mammographer (all mammographers are female). The mammograms may be uncomfortable however it should not be painful.

Where will you receive your mammogram?

In the City of London, screening is provided by **Central and East London Breast Screening Service**. If you are a resident in the City of London, you will likely be offered an appointment at Mile End Hospital.

Cervical Cancer Screening

What is cervical cancer screening?

It is important to note that unlike bowel and breast cancer screening, cervical screening can **not** identify if you have cancer, rather it looks for changes in cells that may lead to cancer.

You will be eligible for screening if you are

- A woman, transgender and non-binary person with a cervix and are aged between 25 and 64

The frequency in testing changes with age, between the age of

- 25 and 49, the testing is every three years
- 50 and 64, the testing is every five years

The test will often be done in your GP practice, when the screening is due you will receive a letter requesting that you make an appointment for the test. Often your test will be taken by the practice nurse, it is important to note that you can always ask for a female nurse or GP.

How will the test be taken

To administer the test, a soft brush will be used to take a sample of cells from the cervix, which will be sent to a lab for testing. The lab will look for Human

Papilloma Virus (HPV), which can cause cervical cancer. If HPV is found, your cells will be looked more closely at to see if there are changes, if there are changes you will be offered a colposcopy. This involved looking at the cervix with a camera.

Other Cancers

There are no other screening programmes in the UK for other types of cancers, however if you are concerned by any symptoms you are having, you should visit your GP immediately.

Questions and Concerns

There was concerns from attendees about how the NHS is promoting the screening programmes, especially for populations in the community who have a lower uptake or individuals who are less likely to attend or engage in the screening programme. Caroline spoke on how North East Cancer Alliance targets specific communities who have a low uptake screenings and may be less engaged in the NHS. They do this through grassroots measures such as going to local community groups and speaking directly to people at local events to promote preventative cancer screenings and increase the awareness of the benefits of these programmes in the community.

There were also concerns brought up surrounding not being able to 'get past the receptionist' and the lack of access to GP appointments. Caroline acknowledged that across the country, GP appointments are harder to access, however if you do have concerns about any of your current symptoms relating to cancer, that your GP needs to be made aware.

Attendees living in the City of London also questioned why mammogram screenings were not able to be done at the Royal London Hospital, as many people had been previously sent there, which for many residents, is more local. Caroline explained that preventative cancer screenings all now occur at Mile End Hospital and you will only be sent to the Royal London Hospital if it is a diagnostic testing, for example not a part of regular screenings programme but if you have symptoms that your GP is concerned about, you will receive a specialised referral for your mammogram.

For more information

If you are looking for more information on cancer screenings please visit [NHS England » Screening and earlier diagnosis](#)

If you interested in obtaining a PSA test kit or want to know more, please visit <https://nelca.mypsatests.org.uk/>.



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