



Putting cancer screening in perspective

A national report on the impact of Australia's cancer screening programs provides evidence on their effectiveness.

Australia has 3 national cancer screening programs to help protect the health of its population through the early detection of cancer or precancerous changes, even when there are no symptoms. These programs use screening tests to look for particular changes and early signs of cancer.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the effectiveness of this type of screening is ultimately determined by whether it produces a population survival benefit that can be assessed by clinical and population-based cancer registry and screening data.

Cancer screening in Australia began in the 1960s with ad hoc cervical screening. More structured programs were introduced from the early 1990s: the National Cervical Screening Program (NCSP) began in 1991; the National Program for the Early Detection of Breast Cancer—now known as BreastScreen Australia—was established in 1991; and the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBCSP) was introduced in 2006, and was fully implemented in 2020.

In 2018, the AIHW released the first national results from an Australian-first project, combining data from BreastScreen Australia, the National Cervical Screening Program, the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program, the Australian Cancer Database, the National Death Index, and the National HPV (human papillomavirus) Vaccination Program Register. 'Without exception, this analysis showed that all 3 programs significantly reduced the burden of these diseases on the Australian community,' says Caroline Arthur, Director of Screening Policy at the Australian Government Department of Health.

For breast cancer, the national data showed that those whose breast cancer was detected through BreastScreen Australia were 42% less likely to die from it within the study period than those diagnosed with breast cancer who had never screened. And the statistics were equally as compelling for bowel cancer screening: the risk of dying from the disease was lower in those detected through the program than those who weren't. This study also showed that people who participated regularly in cervical screening were less likely to develop cervical cancer, with more than 70% of cervical cancers occurring in women who had never screened or who not done so for some time.

'The figures give us a lot of confidence that the programs are worth running,' Arthur says. 'If you compare all 3 programs in terms of how many dollars it takes to save a life, there is some variation. But I think most taxpayers would say it's a reasonable price to pay.'

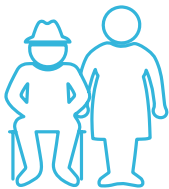
'The AIHW helps keep the programs in the public eye and makes it clear what we are getting for this investment. This provides the opportunity to not only see that women survive better if their cancer is detected early, but how much money screening can save the health system,' Arthur explains. 'For example, how many fewer procedures and drugs does early detection mean?'

'Bearing in mind that a lot of people meet some of their own costs for their cancer treatments it would make that an attractive message to get out to the public,' Arthur says. 'Not only can screening save your life, but it may also save you money as well.'



The **risk of dying from breast cancer was 42% lower** for women diagnosed through BreastScreen Australia that for women who had never been screened through the program

People who participated regularly in **cervical screening were less likely** to develop cervical cancer, with **more than 70% of cervical cancers occurring in women who had never screened** or who not done so for some time



The **risk of dying from bowel cancer was 40% lower** for people diagnosed through the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program than for people who had never been invited