



Breast cancer diagnosis: State of the Nat on 2024

Early diagnosis is critical to the chances of surviving breast cancer. NHS England has a target to reach early diagnosis in 75% of cancers by 2028. However, it is not on track to meet this target for all groups of women. ICBs and Cancer Alliances urgently need to understand what drives these unjustified disparities and develop new approaches to breast cancer diagnosis and specific programmes of work to improve outcomes for all women with breast cancer.

Who loses out on early diagnosis?

Although most breast cancers are caught early, certain groups of women are at a striking diagnosis disadvantage. Our analysis of 217,000 individual instances of breast cancer diagnosis in England between 2019/20 and 2022/23 uncovers the women who are likely to be diagnosed once their breast cancer has already progressed.

Age matters

Fig 1. Initial diagnoses of breast cancer by age and diagnosis (England 2019/20–2022/23)

fig 1

With higher rates of late diagnosis and poorer chances of survival, these women are being left behind to suffer inexcusable inequity:

- **Black and South Asian women** vs White (British).
- **Women in the most deprived areas** vs the least deprived.
- **Older women** 72 years vs screening-age women 50–71 years (who receive routine mammogram invitations).
- **Women in certain localities** highlighted by the variation between the 21 Cancer Alliances in England, e.g. only seven met the NHS's 75% target for early diagnosis of women below routine screening age (18–49 years).

Digging deeper into the social determinants of health

Fig 2. Significance of the inequity in proportion of initial diagnoses of early-stage breast cancer between the least versus most deprived quintile in women age 50–71 years (by Cancer Alliance, 2019/20–2022/23) where significance is a signifier of the level of inequity between two groups.

Fig 3. Alert signals from the data: example profile of an individual Cancer Alliance.

