

PREVENTING BOWEL CANCER

Bowel cancer is the second biggest cancer killer in Australia, however it can be prevented if you are proactive about your health.

SCREEN REGULARLY

The older you are, the greater your chance of developing bowel cancer. From the age of 50 most people should complete a bowel screening test at least every two years. The simple at-home screening test looks for blood in your bowel movement that is invisible to the naked eye and can be caused by a number of bowel conditions. It does not test for cancer.

Most test kits contain a collection stick or brush used to take a small sample from two separate bowel movements. Once completed, the sample is returned to the pathology laboratory by post, or to your GP, as directed. Results are sent directly to you and to the GP you nominate on the form provided.

We urge you to take the test – it might just save your life

TEST RESULTS

Only about 7% of people will have a positive test result, which is most likely due to conditions other than cancer such as haemorrhoids or inflammation of the bowel.

There is a 30-45% chance of the cause being due to polyps (pre-cancerous growths in the bowel), and less than 10% chance of the cause being bowel cancer.

If your result is positive you should make an appointment with your GP. You will generally be referred to a gastroenterologist for a follow up colonoscopy. A colonoscopy is a procedure to visually examine the bowel that takes 20 to 30 minutes. You will usually be able to go home two hours later after the effect of the sedation wears off.

A negative test result indicates that no blood was detected in your bowel movement. It is important to note however that screening tests are not always 100% accurate, particularly because cancers and precancerous growths only bleed intermittently. The test should be repeated at least every two years to increase the chances of early detection.

You should consult your GP if symptoms develop, regardless of the screening test result.

WHERE TO GET A SCREENING TEST

Free screening tests

- Your GP can provide you with a test kit, the cost of which is usually covered by Medicare.
- The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBCSP) invites Australians aged over 50 to screen for bowel cancer using a free, simple test at home. By 2020 the NBCSP will be available to all Australians every two years from age 50 to 74.

To check which year you will receive your free test, go to www.bit.ly/21LsHY

If you are eligible for the NBCSP, you will receive a test kit in the mail close to your birthday.

For more information about the NBCSP, go to www.cancerscreening.gov.au

These tests involve brushing a collection stick briefly along your bowel movement and placing the stick into the collection tube. This is done for two separate bowel movements.

Purchase a screening test

The ColoVantage Home test is available from many GPs, pharmacies or online for \$39.95. To purchase, go to www.colovantage.com.au

To complete this test, simply brush the surface of the bowel motion and swab the water onto a test card. There is no requirement to refrigerate samples or prepare the toilet bowl before using the toilet.

Many health funds provide a rebate for the full cost of the test. Alternatively, a Medicare benefit of up to \$15.20 is usually available for the pathology fee payable on ColoVantage Home tests obtained from your GP.



ACT QUICKLY ON SYMPTOMS

Recognising bowel cancer symptoms and acting quickly is important for early detection of the disease.

Many people do not experience any bowel cancer symptoms until the cancer has become more advanced or spreads to other parts of the body. In fact, bowel cancer can be present for many years before showing any symptoms.

Many people will also experience some of these symptoms during their lives but they will be associated with bowel problems like irritable bowel syndrome or haemorrhoids, not bowel cancer.

Regardless of your age, speak to your GP immediately if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- Bleeding from your bottom or blood in your bowel movements, even if only occasional
- A change in bowel habits for more than two weeks, such as going to the toilet more frequently, constipation, diarrhoea-like motions, feeling that the bowel does not completely empty, or bowel movements that are narrower than usual
- Frequent gas, bloating, fullness or cramps
- Severe or new abdominal pain, which has come on recently for the first time
- A lump in your stomach or rectum
- Unexplained feelings of tiredness, breathlessness or a lack of energy
- Unexplained weight loss or vomiting

KNOW YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

The majority of people who develop bowel cancer do not have a family history of the disease. However, if there is a history of bowel cancer in your family you may be at increased risk.

Regardless of your age, consult your GP to understand your risk and discuss bowel screening methods best suited to your situation.

Your risk may be three to six times higher than average if you have:

- one first-degree* relative diagnosed with bowel cancer before the age of 55; or
- two first or second-degree** relatives diagnosed with bowel cancer on the same side of the family, at any age.

Most people with moderately increased risk will not develop bowel cancer, but it is important that you are proactive about screening. Your GP or specialist will most likely recommend a colonoscopy every five years starting from age 50, or 10 years younger than the age of the youngest person in your family when they were diagnosed with bowel cancer.

You may be among the small group of people who have an even higher chance of developing bowel cancer if you have:

- more than two first or second-degree relatives diagnosed with bowel cancer on the same side of the family; or
- a family history of genetic conditions such as Lynch Syndrome, Familial Adenomatous Polyposis or other rare conditions.

Your GP may refer you to a familial cancer service for assessment and possibly genetic testing.

* First-degree relatives are parents, siblings and children.

** Second-degree relatives are grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews.

BE HEALTHY

To reduce your bowel cancer risk:

- Quit smoking
- Limit or avoid alcohol
- Maintain a healthy weight range
- Exercise regularly

The recommended amount is no more than two standard drinks a day for men and no more than one standard drink per day for women.

At least 30 minutes of moderate exercise most days, such as brisk walking, gentle swimming, mowing the lawn or gardening – something that causes a slight but noticeable increase in your breathing and heart rate.

Vigorous activity for at least 30 minutes, three to four times a week provides additional health and fitness benefits. This may include aerobics, jogging, some competitive sports, speed walking – something that makes you work a bit harder.

- Eat healthy foods
- Five or more serves of vegetables and two serves of fruit every day. One serve of vegetables is equal to half a cup of cooked vegetables or one cup of salad. One serve of fruit is a medium piece, two small pieces of fresh fruit, or one cup of chopped fruit. Choose mostly wholegrain cereals and breads and limit charred and processed meats.

Know Your Risk is a simple and interactive website that guides you through a series of steps to build a family tree of close relatives whose history may impact your risk of bowel cancer. For more information, go to www.knowyourrisk.org.au

