

Early detection of bowel cancer



Bowel cancer, also known as colorectal cancer, occurs in the colon or rectum. Bowel cancer is the third most commonly diagnosed cancer in Australia after non-melanoma skin cancer and prostate cancer, with more than 13,000 people diagnosed each year.

If bowel cancer is detected early, the chance of successful treatment and long-term survival improves significantly.

What are the symptoms?

Not all bowel cancers show symptoms, however you should see your doctor if you notice:

- Bleeding from the back passage or any sign of blood after a bowel motion.
- A change in usual bowel habit, such as straining (constipation) to go to the toilet or loose motions (diarrhoea).
- Abdominal pain or bloating.
- Weight loss for no obvious reason, or loss of appetite.
- Symptoms of anaemia – including unexplained tiredness, weakness or breathlessness.

Experiencing any of the symptoms listed does not necessarily mean you have bowel cancer. Any unusual or persisting symptoms should be reported to your doctor immediately.

Who is at risk?

Everyone is at risk of developing bowel cancer; however the risk greatly increases with age.

Some people may be at a greater risk of developing bowel cancer, including those with:

- A previous history of polyps in the bowel.
- A previous history of bowel cancer.
- Chronic inflammatory bowel disease (eg. Crohn's disease).
- A strong family history of bowel cancer.
- Increased insulin levels or type 2 diabetes.

People who are at an increased risk of developing bowel cancer should discuss possible surveillance options with their doctor.

How is bowel cancer detected?

Bowel cancer can be detected using a variety of methods.

Faecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT) is a simple screening test that looks for hidden traces of blood in a bowel motion in people without symptoms. It can help detect bowel cancer in its early stages. An FOBT can be done at home by taking samples from two or three bowel motions using a test kit. People should have an FOBT every two years from age 50 years.

A population-based screening program for bowel cancer, the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program, began in 2006. The program uses FOBT. If an FOBT finds blood, further diagnostic tests are needed.

Colonoscopy is a test that involves a long, thin, flexible tube with a video camera lens on the end, enabling a specialist to look at the inside of your bowel. If a polyp or bowel cancer is found, it can be removed during the procedure. Colonoscopy is usually performed under sedation as a day procedure. Colonoscopies are also used as a surveillance test for people at increased risk of developing bowel cancer.

Sigmoidoscopy is similar to colonoscopy, however only explores the lower part of the bowel, where cancer is more likely to develop. If a precancerous polyp is detected during the procedure a full bowel examination by colonoscopy is usually needed.

Other diagnostic tests for bowel cancer are also available, and you will need to discuss these options with your doctor.

What else can I do?

Bowel cancer is one of the most preventable cancers. Many lifestyle risk factors may contribute to bowel cancer. Your most effective protection against bowel cancer is to:

- Be screened for bowel cancer every two years if over 50 years of age. If eligible, participate in the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program.
- Get 30 to 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity exercise per day.
- Maintain a healthy body weight.
- Eat a well balanced diet.
- Avoid processed and burnt meat. Limit red meat intake to three to four times per week.
- Avoid or limit your alcohol intake.
- Quit smoking.

Remember, if you have any concerns or questions, please contact your doctor.

Where can I get reliable information?

Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20

Information and support for you and your family for the cost of a local call anywhere in Australia.

Cancer Council Australia website

(with links to state and territory Cancer Councils)

www.cancer.org.au

National Bowel Cancer Screening Program

Information Line 1800 118 868

www.cancerscreening.gov.au