



Early onset bowel cancer

Patient information

What is early onset bowel cancer?

Up until recently, bowel cancer was considered a disease that only affected people over the age of 50. However, over the past few decades there has been an increase in the number of people under 50 years being diagnosed with bowel cancer. This is referred to as early onset.

Early onset bowel cancer in Australia has increased by 40 to 60 percent or more in some younger age groups, although the number of people aged over 50 who get bowel cancer is still higher.

Potential causes for the increase include dietary changes, higher rates of obesity, alcohol intake and physical inactivity. Novel research also suggests changes in the gut microbiome may be related.

Am I at risk?

While there is ongoing research into the causes of early onset bowel cancer, a number of risk factors are known about bowel cancer in general:

- Family history (particularly close relatives)
- Having a history of inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's, ulcerative colitis)
- Previously known polyps in the bowel
- Smoking
- Genetic conditions (eg: Lynch syndrome).

What are the symptoms of bowel cancer?

Some symptoms of bowel cancer can be obvious, others are more subtle. The symptoms below occur in bowel cancer but can often be explained by other conditions too. If you have any of the following symptoms, or have concerns, discuss them with your GP.

- **Persistent changes in bowel habit**, eg: frequent loose stools or constipation that is not your 'usual' pattern, does not improve with treatment and continues for more than a month.
- **Bleeding from the rectum** (blood in the poo) that may be bright red or dark, black and tarry. Dark stools can also be caused by iron tablets but discuss this with your doctor.
- **Weight loss** without any reason or effort
- **Abdominal bloating, cramping or discomfort**
- **Feeling of incomplete emptying** of your bowel after going to the toilet
- **Unexplained fatigue.**





Should I have a test if I don't have any symptoms?

Different tests are recommended depending on your age, risk factors and history.

The test kits mentioned below are **not appropriate** if you have symptoms.

People **without** a family history

- **Aged 50 to 74** – You should automatically receive a kit in the mail from the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBCSP) but if you have lost it or it has expired, you can request a replacement.
- **Aged 45 to 49 years** – Request a kit from the NBCSP using details at the end of this pamphlet.
- **Aged 40 to 44 years** – You can request a non-NBCSP test from your GP or buy a kit online or from a chemist.

People **with** a family history

- A risk is determined based on the number of relatives with bowel cancer, how closely related they are and the age that they were diagnosed.
- If you have a family history, collect as much information as you can about these details, and make an appointment to discuss them with your GP.

What can I do to prevent bowel cancer?

There are many things you can do to help reduce the risk of developing bowel cancer, which also can help prevent many other diseases.

Diet

One of the simplest things you can do is to improve your diet. The most important aspects include ensuring adequate fibre intake (fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes, wholegrains) and reducing consumption of red and processed meats.



More information about diet and cancer can be found on the [Cancer Council website](#) or scan the QR code.



For tips and information on fibre intake, see [Dietitians Australia](#) or scan the QR code.



Physical activity

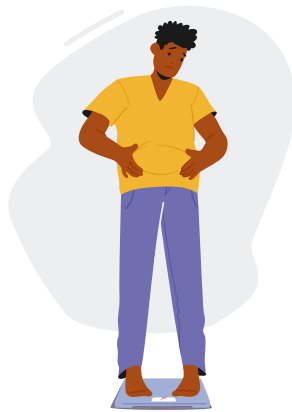
We all know physical activity is beneficial for our health in many ways, but did you know it also helps prevent bowel cancer? Research shows that people who exercise more and spend less time sitting (such as watching TV for long periods) are less likely to develop bowel cancer.





Watch your weight and waistline

Research shows that our waistline can tell us a lot about our risk of bowel cancer. It is estimated that about 11 percent of bowel cancers are caused by higher weight and waist size.



You can measure your waist size at home (see the Heart Foundation website or scan the QR code) or ask your doctor to help you at your next check-up.

You may be at increased risk if your waist is greater than 94cm* (men) or 80cm (women).



Reduce alcohol consumption

Alcohol increases the risk of cancer because ethanol irritates and damages your body's cells.

You may have experienced a sting when you have accidentally used alcohol-based hand sanitisers on an open wound. The same thing is happening inside your bowel where the mucosal lining is very sensitive to damage.

Quit smoking

Smoking can double your risk of bowel cancer because it increases the growth of polyps (small tumours) in the bowel. People who smoke should consider quitting.

If you have tried quitting in the past, it is always worth trying again – the numbers tell us that the more often someone tries, the more likely they are to succeed.

Consider asking your GP for support, contact Quitline on 137 848, or visit www.quit.org.au.



*Asian males: 90cm.

Are there any medications or supplements to help reduce the risk?

Unfortunately, there is not much evidence that supplements can help.

Aspirin (only if safe and under supervision of a medical professional)

Low-dose aspirin may be considered for preventing bowel cancer in average-risk Australians aged 50 to 70. However, it increases bleeding risks and is not recommended for everyone, so you should discuss the benefits and risks with your GP. There is limited evidence on the benefits and risks of low-dose aspirin for younger people.



Do not start aspirin for cancer prevention without discussing it with your doctor.

What should I do if I have some of the symptoms?

If your symptoms have not been assessed and/or investigated, you should make an appointment with your GP to discuss.

In many cases, these symptoms are due to causes other than cancer but it is still important to have an assessment with your doctor.

If you have symptoms, your GP will assess you and generally, they will ask if they can perform an examination. In some cases, they may ask if they can examine the rectum, particularly if there are symptoms such as bleeding or difficulties with bowel motions. You can decline but it does provide valuable information to your doctor that can help them provide the right advice. You can ask your GP to have a chaperone (such as the practice nurse) in attendance. They will then decide whether further testing is needed, including potential referral for a colonoscopy.



I don't have symptoms but I'm worried about my risk

Discuss your concerns with your GP at your next visit.

If you don't have any symptoms or risk factors, your GP will help you to understand your risk, whether a screening test is recommended, and how to obtain one.



If you have certain risk factors, such as a strong family history, but don't have any symptoms, your GP may recommend regular colonoscopies depending on your age and individual situation

Request a free bowel screening test kit



If you're aged **45 to 49** you can request a kit via the [National Cancer Screening Register](#) or scan the QR code.

NATIONAL BOWELCANCER SCREENING PROGRAM

Alternatively, search for NBCSP online or call 1800 627 701. People **50 to 74** years are automatically mailed a kit but if you have lost it, or it has expired, you can request a replacement.

Other resources

Cancer Council



Bowel cancer: [Click here](#) or scan the QR code.



Bowel cancer screening: [Click here](#) or scan the QR code



Information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: [Click here](#) or scan the QR code.

National Cancer Screening Register



For more information about the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program: [Click here](#) or scan the QR code.

The information provided is for information purposes only. If you are a patient using this publication, you should seek assistance from a healthcare professional when interpreting these materials and applying them to your individual circumstances.



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