

# Bowel cancer screening



Bowel cancer (also known as colorectal cancer) is one of the most commonly diagnosed cancers in Queensland men and women.

Around 5% of men and 3% of women will develop bowel cancer before the age of 75. Bowel cancer is more common in people over 50, but it can occur at any age. Bowel cancer is cancer in any part of the large bowel (colon or rectum). It is sometimes called colorectal cancer. It may also be called colon cancer, depending on where it starts.

## Causes and Risk factors

The exact cause of bowel cancer is not known. However, research shows that people with certain risk factors are more likely to develop bowel cancer. If you are at an increased risk, discuss options with your health professional or GP.

### Risk factors

- **Over 50** – most people who develop bowel cancer are aged over 50, and the risk increases with age
- **Polyps** – a previous history of polyps in the bowel
- **Bowel diseases** – people who have an inflammatory bowel disease, such as Crohn's disease, or ulcerative colitis, have a significantly increased risk
- **Lifestyle factors** – being overweight, having a diet high in red meat or processed meats such as salami or ham, drinking alcohol and smoking
- **Strong family history** – a small number of bowel cancers run in families. If one or more of your close family members (such as a parent or sibling) have had bowel cancer, it may increase your risk
- **Medical history of other diseases** – a previous diagnosis of bowel cancer, ovarian or endometrial (uterine) cancer can increase the risk of developing bowel cancer
- **Rare genetic disorders** – a small number of bowel cancers are associated with an inherited gene (familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP) and Lynch syndrome). These faulty genes cause a small number (about 5–6%) of bowel cancers
- **Increased insulin levels** or type 2 diabetes.

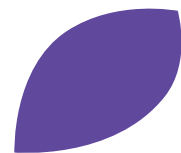
## Early Detection and Symptoms

In its early stages, bowel cancer may have no symptoms. Screening is important to increase the chance of early diagnosis. However, many people with bowel cancer do experience symptoms.

### These can include:

- Blood in the stools (poo) or on the toilet paper
- A change in bowel habit, such as diarrhoea, constipation, or smaller, more frequent bowel movements
- A change in appearance or consistency of bowel movements (e.g. narrower stools or mucus in stools)
- A feeling of fullness or bloating in the abdomen (stomach) or a strange sensation in the rectum, often during a bowel movement
- A feeling that the bowel hasn't emptied completely
- Unexplained weight loss
- Weakness or fatigue
- Rectal or anal pain
- A lump in the rectum or anus
- Abdominal pain or swelling.
- A low red blood cell count (anaemia), which can cause tiredness and weakness
- Rarely, a blockage in the bowel.

There are many factors that can cause changes in bowel function and it does not mean it is bowel cancer. However, any amount of bleeding is not normal, and you should see your doctor for a check-up.



## Screening for bowel cancer

### FAECAL OCCULT BLOOD TEST (FOBT) KITS

Cancer Council Queensland recommends that everyone aged 50 and over is screened for bowel cancer using a faecal occult blood test (FOBT) every two years. FOBT is the most effective population screening tool for detecting early signs of bowel cancer.

The FOBT is used to detect hidden blood in bowel motions. The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBCSP) sends eligible people a quick and easy bowel cancer screening kit by mail. The kit contains the FOBT screening kit. The test can be done at home.

All eligible Australians aged between 50 and 74 years of age (without symptoms) are invited to screen for bowel cancer every two years. The NBCSP aims to reduce deaths from bowel cancer through early detection.

If you are not eligible under the national screening program, you can still be tested. Contact your General Practitioner (GP) to discuss your screening options. Your GP can request a Faecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT), which is eligible for a Medicare benefit. Most pathology practices bulk bill this test.

### Other options for obtaining a kit:

- Some pharmacies have FOBT kits available to buy over the counter
- Some pathology services or health organisations provide online options for purchasing a kit.

Talk to your doctor about using a FOBT kit before buying one.

## Reduce your risk of bowel cancer

### Some things reduce your risk of developing bowel cancer, including:

- being physically active
- maintaining a healthy weight
- cutting out processed meat, such as salami or ham
- cutting down on red meat
- drinking less alcohol
- not smoking
- eating wholegrains, dietary fibre, and dairy foods.

Talk to your doctor about whether you should take aspirin, which has shown to reduce the risk of developing bowel cancer.