

# Family History of Bowel Cancer?

**Ask around in your family and you may well find someone who has had bowel cancer.**

**But that does not mean you are going to get it.**

A family history of bowel cancer may be found in up to 15% of patients with this disease. One in ten families have bowel cancer running through it, and having a first-degree relative who has had bowel cancer almost doubles the risk of developing the disease. Patients are also more at risk if they have had two or more older close relatives from the same side of the family with bowel cancer.

There are two major forms of family bowel cancer disposition.

## FAP

The first is familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP). It is thought that most bowel cancers start as benign innocent growths on the wall of the bowel called polyps. Polyps are like small spots or cherries on stalks and most do not produce symptoms. A small percentage of people (FAP patients) with bowel cancer have this inherited condition that makes them more likely to develop polyps. If these pre-cancerous polyps are removed the risk of colorectal cancer may be reduced. Not all polyps are pre-cancerous.

There is a useful website with information about FAP—[www.fapgene.co.uk](http://www.fapgene.co.uk). This does not aim to provide medical advice, but has links to many organisations working in the field of cancer genetics, and specifically FAP.

## HNPCC

The second form of inherited predisposition to bowel cancer is hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC), which is linked to mutation in certain genes. The Amsterdam criteria for identifying HNPCC families are:

- ◆ three or more relatives with histologically verified bowel cancer, one of them being a first degree relative of the other two
- ◆ bowel cancer occurring across at least two consecutive generations
- ◆ in one of the relatives the bowel cancer should have been diagnosed before the age of 50

## Screening

If you are worried, talk to your GP about screening possibilities in your area. . Screening can help to detect polyps, or bowel cancer, at an early stage, and is usually carried out using a procedure called a colonoscopy.

## Genetic Testing

If you have been diagnosed with cancer, or you have a relative with bowel cancer who is willing to be tested, you might be offered genetic testing if your doctor thinks that your family is likely to have a genetic mutation in one of the known bowel cancer genes. Testing is a two-step process: looking for the genetic mutation running in your family (mutation searching) and then using that information to look for the mutation in other family members who don't have cancer (predictive testing).

