

**Bowel cancer is a disease of the large bowel (colon) or rectum. It is also sometimes called colon or colorectal cancer. It is the second largest cause of cancer deaths in the UK, and claims almost 50 lives every day. Around one in 18 people will get bowel cancer at some point in their lives, and it affects men and women equally. However, of those who do get the disease, 90% survive if it is caught early.**

## **What are the symptoms of bowel cancer?**

The most common symptoms to look out for are:

- bleeding from the bottom without any obvious reason
- a recent change in your normal bowel habit which lasts for more than 4 - 6 weeks
- feeling a need to go more often or looser stools
- abdominal pain, especially if severe
- a lump in your tummy
- weight loss and tiredness – especially if unexplained

Please remember that most of these symptoms will not be cancer. If you have one or more of these symptoms for more than four weeks you should go and see your GP.

## **Why should I take part in the bowel screening programme?**

Regular screening has been shown to reduce the risk of dying from bowel cancer. Bowel screening aims to detect bowel cancer at an early stage, before people are experiencing any symptoms, when treatment is more likely to be effective. Bowel screening can also detect bleeding polyps, which are not cancerous, but may develop into cancer in the future. The polyps can be removed, reducing the risk of bowel cancer developing.

Some people are also screened on a regular basis if there is a family history of bowel cancer. Regular screening will ensure that any signs of bowel cancer are picked up at the earliest possible stage.

## **How does the screening programme work?**

The method used to screen for bowel cancer is an FOB (faecal occult blood) test which detects blood hidden in the faeces (stool). An FOB test does not diagnose bowel cancer, but does highlight a need for further investigations.

Screening test kits are sent out to people in the target age group, to complete in the privacy of their own home. The kit needs to be kept in a cool place until it is returned to the laboratory. You do not have to change your diet in any way before doing this test.

Over the next few days, when using the toilet, the faeces (stool) from three separate bowel movements can be saved in a disposable container or onto toilet paper, and small samples from each of them are smeared on the test kit, using a piece of card. The faeces (stools) are flushed away as normal after the sample has been taken. Once the test is completed, the card should then be promptly posted in a secure envelope back to a laboratory, where a chemical is added to the samples on the card to check for blood.

The results of the test are sent in the post. If the test is positive, both you and your GP will be notified, and you will be invited to attend a clinic at the hospital and have further investigations to identify the cause of the bleeding.

Around 98 in 100 people will test 'normal' and will be asked to repeat the test in 2 years if they are still within the eligible age range. Around 2 in 100 people will test 'abnormal' and will be referred for further investigations.

Around 4 in 100 people may initially test 'unclear' which means a slight suggestion of blood in the test sample and will be asked to repeat the test. Most people who repeat the test receive a 'normal' result.



## **Beating Bowel Cancer**

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Registered Charity No: 1063614

www.beatingbowelcancer.org  
Registered Company No: 3377182 (England & Wales)

## Bowel screening programmes

You must be registered at your current address with a GP to be sent an invitation. Each country has a different programme:

### England

The NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme is currently offered every two years to everyone in England aged 60 - 69. It is gradually being extended to include everyone up to age 75. Older people can also call and ask for a kit if they would like to take part. The first test should arrive within a few weeks of your 60th birthday. If it does not, please call the NHS Helpline and ask for one.

Helpline: 0800 707 6060  
[www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk](http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk)

### Wales

The Bowel Screening Wales programme was launched in October 2008 and is offered every two years to everyone (registered with a GP) in Wales aged 60 to 69. By the end of 2009 all people who are aged between 60 and 69 and resident in Wales with a birthday before 1st August should have been invited for screening. During 2010 invitations should have been sent to people aged between 60 and 69 years of age with birthdays between August and December.

Helpline: 0800 294 3370  
[www.wales.nhs.uk/bsw](http://www.wales.nhs.uk/bsw)

### Scotland

The Scottish Bowel Screening Programme invites all men and women in Scotland between the ages of 50 to 74 for screening every two years. The programme has been rolled out across Scotland and is now available in all NHS Boards.

Helpline: 0800 0121 833  
[www.bowelscreening.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.bowelscreening.scot.nhs.uk)

### Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Bowel Cancer Screening Programme offers screening every two years to all men and women aged 60 to 69. People in this age group will automatically be sent an invitation and a screening kit so they can do the test at home.

Helpline: 0800 015 2514  
[www.cancerscreening.hscni.net/bowel/toc.html](http://www.cancerscreening.hscni.net/bowel/toc.html)

## Why is screening not available to people in their fifties except in Scotland?

Beating Bowel Cancer regularly asks policy makers the same question! We are lobbying to reduce the age at which men and women are invited for screening, as we believe screening at a lower age range is key to saving more lives from this disease and to picking up bowel cancers before they reach an advanced stage.

### What if I'm not eligible for screening?

***If you want to be screened because you have symptoms, you should make an appointment with your GP.***

If you are concerned about bowel cancer but not experiencing symptoms, you may like to consider a private screening service. Point of Care Testing Ltd is just one independent company offering this service, allowing people of all ages and from any location to take part in this vital health check. The service costs £19.98 and you will be supplied with an FOB testing kit, a return mailer envelope and full instructions. Samples are analysed in their own dedicated laboratory and the results are returned to you within 10 days.

Helpline: 0845 603 5709  
[www.pocl.co.uk](http://www.pocl.co.uk)

### What about 'over-the-counter' test kits?

We would not recommend buying other 'over-the-counter' test kits as quality standards and a clear follow-up pathway cannot be guaranteed. 'Self-test' procedures could run also the risk of inaccuracy due to user error.

### The future of bowel cancer screening

In October 2010 the Prime Minister announced that the Government would be allocating £60 million to fund a new flexible sigmoidoscopy screening programme for people in England aged over 55 years. This decision was made following the results of a long term study, led by Professor Wendy Atkin of Imperial College, which found that a single flexible sigmoidoscopy test, in those aged 55 to 64 years, reduced the risk of individuals dying from bowel cancer by 43% and the risk of individuals developing bowel cancer by one third. For more details please refer to our "Flexible Sigmoidoscopy" factsheet.



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