

Bowel cancer screening

The NHS runs a bowel cancer screening programme throughout the UK. This factsheet explains the purpose of the programme, who is eligible and how the process works.

Why screen for bowel cancer

Bowel cancer screening aims to detect bowel cancer at an early stage in people with no symptoms. The earlier cancer is found, the more likely treatment is to be effective.

Screening can also detect polyps (overgrowths of cells in the lining of the bowel). Polyps are usually harmless but over time they can change and become malignant (cancerous). Polyps can usually be removed, reducing the risk of bowel cancer developing. This is particularly important as bowel cancer is highly treatable when it is found early.

Research shows that regular bowel cancer screening reduces the risk of dying from bowel cancer by 16%. Bowel Cancer UK urges everyone who is offered screening to take up this simple test – it could save your life.

How does the screening programme work?

If you are eligible and screening for your age group is available in your area you will receive an invitation letter and an information leaflet explaining the programme. This is sent according to your date of birth, not the year you were born.

About a week later you will be sent a Faecal Occult Blood (FOB) test kit (which tests poo for hidden blood) with instructions for doing the test at home. (In Scotland the letter and kit are sent together.) Once you have sent the kit back to the laboratory the results will be sent out within two weeks.

As long as you are eligible you will receive a repeat invitation and screening test kit every two years. GPs aren't directly involved in the

programme but are notified when invitations for screening are sent out in their area. They also receive a copy of the results letter sent to their patients.

Make sure you have registered with your local doctors' surgery so that when you reach the correct age (and when screening is available in your area) you will get an invitation to take part.

What happens next?

Around 98 in 100 people will receive a **normal** result and will then be returned to routine screening. This means you will receive an invitation for bowel cancer screening every two years if you are still within the eligible age range.

Around 2 in 100 people will receive an **abnormal** result. This means that some blood was detected in the sample. If you receive an abnormal result it's important to remember that the test indicates blood, not cancer, which can occur for a variety of reasons. In this situation you will be referred to a specialist screening practitioner to discuss further investigation. Usually people are offered a colonoscopy (where a tube with a camera on the end is passed through the rectum) so the whole lining of the large bowel can be seen. Out of every ten people who have a colonoscopy, five will have a normal result, four will have a polyp(s) and one will have cancer.

Around 4 in 100 people may initially receive an **unclear** result. This means that there was a slight suggestion of blood in the test sample. This could be caused by conditions other than cancer such as piles. An unclear result doesn't mean that cancer is present, but that the FOB test will need to be repeated.

Who gets screened?

The screening programme varies in the different countries of the UK.

England

The NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme offers screening to men and women between the ages of 60-69 every two years. This age range is being extended to include people aged 70-74, but it won't be fully implemented across the country until 2014. Until then, anyone over the age of 70 can request a screening kit, by calling the programme's freephone helpline on 0800 707 6060, Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm).

Scotland

The Scottish Bowel Screening Programme offers screening to men and women between the ages of 50-74 every two years. The programme is available in all NHS Boards. For further information call the Scottish Bowel Screening freephone helpline on 0800 0121 833, Monday-Friday, 8am-6pm.

Wales

Bowel Screening Wales offers screening to men and women between the ages of 60-74 every

two years. For further information call the Welsh freephone helpline on 0800 294 3370, Monday-Friday, 8am-5pm.

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Bowel Cancer Screening Programme offers screening to men and women between the ages of 60-69. (The age range will be extended to 60-71 years from April 2012). For further information call the Northern Ireland freephone helpline on 0800 015 2514, Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm.

In between screening tests

Screening doesn't stop bowel cancer occurring, so it's important to be aware of the symptoms that could indicate bowel cancer and what you can do to reduce your risk.

Symptoms to look out for include:

- bleeding from your bottom and/or blood in your poo
- a change in your bowel habit lasting three weeks or more
- unexplained weight loss
- extreme tiredness for no obvious reason
- a pain or lump in your tummy

Source

The information in this factsheet is based on the NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme's current guidelines

Further sources of information

We have a range of related Factsheets that you can download from our website here:

<http://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk/information-resources/factsheets>

To find out more about this product, or to tell us what you think, please call us on 020 7940 1760 or email feedback@bowelcanceruk.org.uk

© Bowel Cancer UK
Bowel Cancer Screening Factsheet V04
Information correct at time of publication January 2012
Date for review January 2014

