

Bowel cancer

Finding it early



Bowel cancer (also known as colorectal cancer) is the second most common cancer in Australia and the second most common cause of cancer death. Yet if found early, nearly all cases of bowel cancer can be cured.

What is the bowel?

The bowel is the longest part of the digestive tract ('the gut'). It has two sections: the small bowel, where food is absorbed and the large bowel, where water and salts are absorbed.

The large bowel is made up of two parts – the colon and the rectum.

What is bowel cancer?

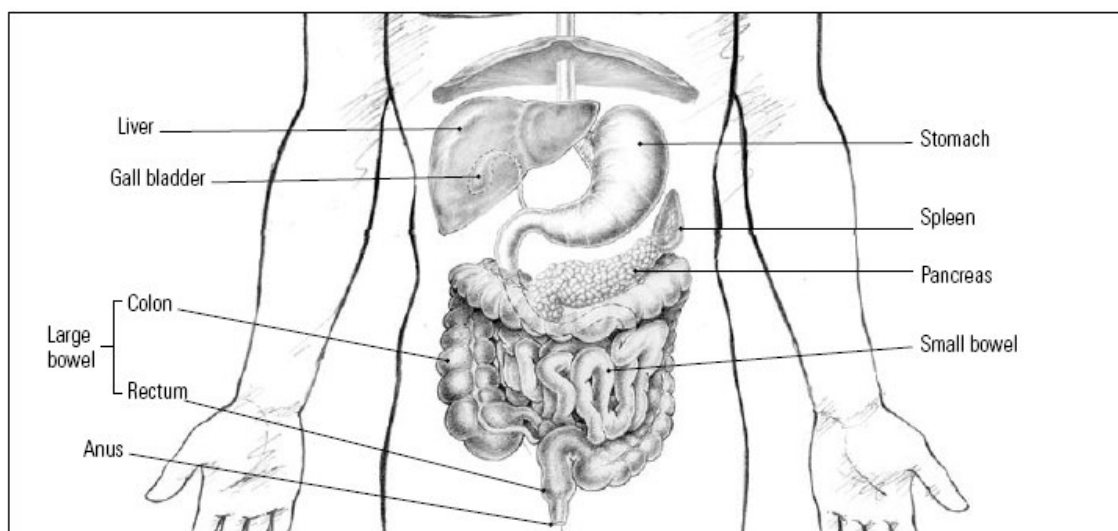
Bowel cancer is a cancerous growth that usually starts in the lining of the large bowel. It can grow there for a long time before spreading to other parts of the body.

This is why the earlier a bowel cancer is found, the better the chance of curing it. There is a 90% chance of cure if the cancer is found at an early stage.

How common is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is the second most common cancer in Victoria and it affects men and women. More than 3000 Victorians are diagnosed each year.

The digestive tract



Who is at risk of bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer can occur at any age, but the risk is greater if you are over the age of 50.

Your risk of bowel cancer also increases if you:

- have a strong family history of bowel cancer
- have had extensive inflammatory bowel disease (ulcerative colitis or Crohn's colitis) for more than eight years.

If these factors apply to you, talk to your doctor about your risk of bowel cancer.

Symptoms of bowel cancer

Bowel cancer often occurs without symptoms but it is important to see your doctor if you notice any of the following:

- bleeding from your back passage or any sign of blood after a bowel motion
- a persistent change in bowel habits: for example, loose or more frequent bowel motions, increased constipation, and/or needing to go to the toilet more than usual
- the feeling that your bowel does not empty completely
- abdominal pain
- loss of weight for no obvious reason, unexplained tiredness, weakness or breathlessness. These may be due to anaemia caused by lack of iron. This type of anaemia can be a result of bowel cancer.

Everyone over the age of 40 should watch out for warning signs of bowel cancer. If you have any of these symptoms, see your doctor who will refer you for any tests you may need. Usually there is a simple explanation, but if it is bowel cancer, it is best to find it early.

Screening for bowel cancer

Bowel cancer screening involves testing people without any obvious symptoms of bowel cancer. Screening with a faecal occult blood test (FOBT) is recommended for healthy people aged over 50.

Faecal occult blood test (FOBT)

An FOBT is a simple test for the early signs of bowel cancer. It involves taking tiny samples from two or three bowel motions using a test kit.

The samples are collected at home and then sent to a laboratory for testing.

FOBTs look for tiny amounts of blood in a bowel motion (blood which cannot be seen with your own eyes). Blood in a bowel motion could be caused by a polyp (a growth on the inside of the bowel that could develop into cancer) or a bowel cancer that bleeds. It may also be due to other conditions such as haemorrhoids. If blood is found in a bowel motion, further tests will be needed to find out what has caused the bleeding.

Remember, bowel cancer is highly (90%) curable if found at an early stage. And polyps found through FOBT can be removed before they develop into cancer.

Where can I get an FOBT?

Men and women over the age of 50 should see their doctor about doing an FOBT every two years.

You can also call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 for more information.

Reducing your risk of bowel cancer

You can help to reduce your risk of bowel cancer by:

- eating a healthy diet, including plenty of vegetables and fruit and only small amounts of animal fat
- maintaining a healthy body weight
- exercising regularly
- not smoking
- limiting alcohol.

By following this advice, it doesn't mean that you will never get bowel cancer, but it may reduce your risk and has other benefits too.

For more information contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

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