

Finding and preventing bowel cancer



Bowel cancer, also known as colorectal cancer, is the second biggest cancer killer in Australia (after lung cancer). More than 3,600 Victorian men and women are diagnosed each year and more than 1,300 die from the disease. However, more than 90% of bowel cancers can be cured if found early.

If you are aged 50 or over, Cancer Council recommends doing a simple, at-home test every two years. Regular screening is important because bowel cancer can develop without noticeable symptoms.

What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is a cancerous growth that 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.

Who is at risk of bowel cancer?

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

Your risk of bowel cancer also increases if you:

- have a strong family history of bowel cancer
- have had serious inflammatory bowel disease (ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease) for more than eight years
- smoke
- have a poor diet and do not exercise
- have a waistline of over 80cm (women) or 94cm (men)

- have a rare inherited genetic disorder, such as hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC) or familial adenoma polyposis (FAP).

To help reduce your risk of bowel cancer:

- eat a healthy diet, including plenty of vegetables and fruit and minimal amounts of animal fat and processed meats
- maintain a healthy body weight
- exercise regularly
- don't smoke
- limit alcohol
- screen regularly.

Bowel cancer warning signs

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 e.g. loose or more frequent bowel motions, increased constipation, needing to go to the toilet more than usual
- the feeling that your bowel does not empty completely
- abdominal pain
- unexplained weight loss, tiredness, weakness or breathlessness.

In most cases the above changes will not be due to bowel cancer but it is important to get checked out.

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 every two years for men and women aged 50 and over.

Faecal occult blood test (FOBT)

Screening for bowel cancer involves a simple, at-home test called a faecal occult blood test (FOBT). An FOBT looks for traces of blood in the bowel motion (faeces), which are invisible to the naked eye and could be a sign of bowel cancer. The test involves taking a tiny sample from two separate bowel motions, using the sampling sticks provided. The samples are sealed in an airtight container and mailed to a pathology lab for analysis.

An FOBT is positive when traces of blood are found in either sample. In most cases blood will be due to conditions other than cancer, such as polyps (growths on the lining of the bowel) or haemorrhoids, but it needs to be investigated. If your FOBT is positive you will receive a letter asking you to speak to your doctor about follow-up tests to determine the cause.

If your FOBT is negative you are advised to re-screen in two years.

How much does screening cost?

Thanks to the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program, those who turn 50, 54, 58, 60, 62, 64, 66, 68, 70, 72 and 74 in 2018 will receive a free FOBT in the mail.

If you are over 50 but not eligible for the national program, ask your doctor or pharmacist about purchasing a screening test for approximately \$36.

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