

## Managing your bowel cancer risk: lifestyle factors



This information is for people who want to know what lifestyle changes they can make to reduce their risk of developing bowel cancer. It is based on the evidence available at time of publication.

### What is a lifestyle factor?

These are behaviours and habits, such as exercise or smoking, which can be changed to lower the risk of developing cancer.

### What lifestyle factors make a difference to cancer risk?

Research shows that having a good diet, exercising and maintaining a healthy weight may lower your chance of getting cancer and other diseases.

#### 1. Maintain a healthy weight

Being overweight or obese increases your risk of bowel cancer. Try to keep your weight within a healthy range.

You can check your risk by measuring your waistline. The risk of bowel cancer is much higher in men with a waistline measurement over 94cm and in women with a waistline over 80cm.

Another guide is your body mass index (BMI). BMI is your weight relative to your height. You can work this out by dividing your weight (in kilograms) by your height (in metres squared). Ideal BMI is between 18.5 and 25kg/m<sup>2</sup>.

- Overweight = 25–30kg/m<sup>2</sup>
- Obese = more than 30kg/m<sup>2</sup>

#### 2. Be active

Regular exercise and staying a healthy weight – in childhood, adolescence and adulthood – lowers the risk of bowel cancer.

Reasons for this may be that:

- exercise helps waste to pass through the bowel quicker
- active bodies produce less insulin. Insulin is known to speed up tumour growth.

Aim for one hour of moderate activity or 30 minutes of energetic activity every day.

#### 3. Eat a balanced diet

The most important thing is to balance:

- total kilojoules (or calories) you eat
- with the total kilojoules you use through regular exercise and activity.

This is more important than avoiding, or eating a lot of a particular food. However, some recommendations about particular foods can be made.

A diet low in fat and high in fresh fruit and vegetables will help you stay the body weight that is best for you. Vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower and brussel sprouts are especially good. Studies have shown that they may have cancer protective properties.

Dairy foods contain calcium and vitamin D. They are important for keeping your bones strong. No studies have shown that dairy foods increase the risk of bowel cancer. It is best to include low fat dairy products in your diet.

Red meat, and in particular processed meat, may make the risk of getting bowel cancer higher. Limit how much processed meat you have. This includes sausages, frankfurts, salami, bacon and ham. Avoid charring (burning) food as happens when you BBQ meat. Try to choose lean (low fat) cuts of meat or chicken. Eat more fish and introduce some vegetarian meals.

Unprocessed wheat bran, and wholegrain cereals combined with a low fat diet has been shown to slow advanced polyps from growing bigger in the bowel.

#### 4. Limit alcohol

Drinking alcohol increases your risk of getting cancer. It's not just heavy drinking, or particular types of drinks which make the risk higher. The more you drink (beer, wine, spirits, etc.), the higher your risk. Alcohol is high in calories – reducing the amount you drink can also help you achieve a healthy weight.

For those who choose to drink alcohol it is recommended that they drink no more than two standard drinks per day.

One standard drink equals:

- 285ml of beer – one glass
- 100ml of wine – one small glass
- 30ml of spirits – one measure of spirits

#### 5. Quit smoking

There are links between cigarette smoking and bowel cancer. Cigarettes contain over 60 chemicals which cause cancer.

It is never too late to stop smoking. The younger you are, and the sooner you stop, the better. Even smokers who quit at the age of 60 can lower their chance of getting cancer and other diseases.

#### 6. Aspirin

Studies have shown that taking aspirin can lower the chance of getting bowel cancer.

Some things to consider:

- the benefits apply to people with familial and non-familial cancer
- discuss the regular use of aspirin with your doctor to see if it is suitable for you
- in Lynch Syndrome (HNPCC), taking aspirin is standard care (Lynch Syndrome is a known genetic change that causes bowel cancer).

#### 7. Stress

Despite a lot of research in the area, there is no proof that stress causes cancer. All the things listed above are far more important risk factors for bowel cancer.

However, for many of us, stress can lead us to make poor lifestyle choices, such as smoking more, pouring an extra glass of wine, feeling too tired to exercise or cook healthy meals. When feeling stressed try going for a walk or talking to a friend instead.

#### Bowel Cancer Risk Calculator

This online interactive risk calculator uses evidence-based guidelines and includes family and personal history to determine an individual's risk of developing bowel cancer. It provides screening and surveillance recommendations and addresses modifiable lifestyle risk factors.

Find the calculator at:

[www.cancervic.org.au/bowel-cancer-risk-calculator/](http://www.cancervic.org.au/bowel-cancer-risk-calculator/)

#### What that word means

**average risk** This means that someone's chance of getting a disease is the same as any other person in the population. Also known as *population risk*.

**high risk** This means that someone's chance of getting a disease in the future is higher than average. This is due to a:

- family history of the disease and/or;
- change in a gene known to make the person more likely to get that disease.

People 'at high risk' should think about ways to lower their risk

**family history** A careful look at the medical history of family members of an individual who has bowel cancer. This may involve:

- getting information from death certificates
- questioning other family members.

This information helps your medical team understand your family's level of risk for getting cancer.

**gene change** A change somewhere in a gene. A change may be:

- inherited
- caused by a mistake while a cell is reproducing itself
- caused by some chemicals or viruses
- caused by events that science is yet to find.

A change in a gene may lead to the gene not working in the right way. This can make the person more likely to get cancer. A gene change is also known as a gene alteration or gene mutation. Not all people with gene changes get cancer.

September 2013

