

Text taken from National Bowel Screening Programme, 'All About Bowel Screening' booklet

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT BOWEL SCREENING

We know you will have a lot of questions so we have tried to answer those most often asked here. If there is anything you need to know which you can't find here, please talk to your doctor.

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### WHAT IS THE BOWEL?

The bowel is part of our food digestive system. It is divided into the small bowel and the large bowel, and connects the stomach to the anus. The large bowel is where cancer most often develops.

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### WHAT IS BOWEL CANCER?

Bowel cancer is also called colon, rectal or colorectal cancer.

Bowel cancer occurs when normal cells on the inside of the bowel become abnormal and grow out of control. The cells can turn into a polyp and some polyps may eventually develop into cancer over a number of years.

It can take a long time before the cancer grows and spreads to other parts of the body.

Regular bowel screening, of people who are not experiencing any symptoms, provides an opportunity to find and treat bowel cancer at an early stage.

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### WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF BOWEL CANCER?

Common signs of bowel cancer may include:

- a change to your normal pattern of going to the toilet that continues for several weeks (such as diarrhoea, constipation, or feeling that your bowel doesn't empty completely)
- blood in your bowel motion

Although these symptoms are usually caused by other conditions, it's important to get them checked by your doctor.

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## HOW COMMON IS BOWEL CANCER?

New Zealand has one of the highest bowel cancer rates in the world. Bowel cancer is the second highest cause of cancer death in New Zealand. More than 3000 people are diagnosed with bowel cancer every year and more than 1200 die from the disease.

**If you develop any symptoms of bowel cancer, it is important that you talk to your doctor.**

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## WHO IS AT MOST RISK OF BOWEL CANCER?

Bowel cancer is more common in those over the age of 60, and is more common in men than in women.

You can reduce your risk of developing bowel cancer by:

- having a healthy diet high in fruit, vegetables and fibre
- regular exercise
- not smoking

People who have had extensive inflammatory bowel disease or have a family history of bowel cancer may have a higher risk of developing bowel cancer.

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## WHY IS REGULAR BOWEL SCREENING IMPORTANT?

Bowel screening every two years can help save lives by finding bowel cancer at an early stage, when it can often be cured. There may be no warning signs that you have bowel cancer.

Bowel screening can also detect polyps (growths). These are not cancers, but they may develop into cancers over a number of years. Most polyps can be easily removed, reducing the risk that bowel cancer will develop.

For more information about the bowel screening programme, please see <https://www.nsu.govt.nz/national-bowel-screening-programme>

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### WHAT IS THE BOWEL SCREENING TEST?

The test used by the National Bowel Screening Programme is a faecal immunochemical (FIT) test. It can detect tiny traces of blood present in a small sample of your bowel motion (poo). This may be an early warning sign that something is wrong with your bowel. You do the test yourself in your own home.

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### HOW DO I DO THE TEST?

The free test is quick, clean and simple to do by yourself at home. Your test kit comes with instructions on how to use it, and a consent form.

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### IT IS IMPORTANT TO RETURN YOUR TEST KIT WITHIN SIX MONTHS OF RECEIVING IT.

To do the test, you need to:

- collect a small sample from your bowel motion (poo)
- put the sample tube in the zip-lock bag provided, along with the signed and completed consent form
- post it as soon as possible in the Freepost envelope provided

Keep the sample in a cool place until you post it. To prevent any postal delays, it's best not to send it on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday.

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### SCREENING IS FOR PEOPLE WHO DON'T HAVE SYMPTOMS

Most people aged 60 to 74 who have no obvious signs or symptoms of bowel cancer can do the bowel screening test.

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### WHO SHOULD TALK TO THEIR DOCTOR?

Some people may have an increased risk of developing bowel cancer.

The risk factors include:

- you have two or more close family members on the same side of the family who have had bowel cancer
- you have a close family member who has been diagnosed with bowel cancer at a young age (under 55 years)

- you have a number of family members over two or three generations who have had bowel cancer
- you and your family have a known or suspected genetic bowel cancer syndrome
- you have had extensive inflammatory bowel disease, such as ulcerative colitis, for more than 10 years

If you have one of these risk factors you should discuss this with your doctor at your next visit.

You should still do the bowel screening test, even if one of these risk factors applies to you.

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## WHO SHOULDN'T DO THE BOWEL SCREENING TEST?

Bowel screening is not right for everyone.

You should not be part of the bowel screening programme if you:

- have symptoms of bowel cancer
- have had a colonoscopy within the last five years
- are on a bowel polyp or bowel cancer surveillance programme
- have had or are currently being treated for bowel cancer
- have had your large bowel removed
- are currently being treated for ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease
- are seeing your doctor about bowel problems

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## HOW WILL I GET MY RESULTS?

You will receive a letter with your results and information about what this means for you. You may also receive a call from your doctor or a nurse.

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## WHEN WILL I GET MY RESULTS?

You will receive your results within three weeks of returning your completed bowel screening kit.

If you don't receive your results within three weeks, please call the National Bowel Screening Programme on 0800 924 432.

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## WHAT DOES A NORMAL TEST RESULT MEAN?

If your test result is negative this means that you don't need any further investigation at this time.

However, because bowel cancers do not bleed all the time there is a risk that cancer may be missed if it was not bleeding when your test was done.

Bowel cancer may also start to slowly develop between screening tests.

That's why doctors recommend you repeat the screening test every two years, if you are still eligible.

If you develop any signs or symptoms of bowel cancer, it is important that you talk to your doctor.

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### WHAT DOES AN ABNORMAL TEST RESULT MEAN?

A positive test result does not necessarily mean you have bowel cancer.

Small amounts of blood in your bowel motion are most commonly caused by polyps, or other minor conditions such as haemorrhoids (piles), which can easily be treated.

If your test is positive it means you will need a further investigation. This will usually be a colonoscopy (an internal examination of the large bowel).

Your doctor or a nurse will contact you to discuss your results and the type of follow up test that is right for you.

If you have a family history of bowel cancer, you may be advised to see your doctor, or be referred to the New Zealand Familial Gastrointestinal Cancer Service.

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### WHAT DOES A COLONOSCOPY INVOLVE?

A colonoscopy involves a specially trained doctor putting a thin tube into your anus. There is a very small camera on the end of the tube which is used to examine the lining of your bowel, to see if there are any problems.

A colonoscopy can identify whether polyps (growths) or cancers are present.

If the doctor sees any polyps in your bowel, they will generally remove them and send them to the laboratory to check for any cancer cells.

Polyps are not cancers, but they may develop into cancers over a number of years.

Removing polyps is usually painless.

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## DO I NEED TO PAY FOR THE COLONOSCOPY, OTHER TESTS OR TREATMENT?

The colonoscopy and any follow-up tests or treatments organised through the National Bowel Screening Programme within the public health system are free.

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## WHAT IF I HAVE BOWEL CANCER?

If you are found to have bowel cancer you will be referred for treatment. The main treatment for bowel cancer is surgery. In some cases chemotherapy or radiotherapy may be recommended.

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## HOW SUCCESSFULLY CAN BOWEL CANCER BE TREATED?

People who are diagnosed with bowel cancer at an early stage have a much greater chance of being successfully treated. If the cancer is detected at a later, more advanced stage, it is harder to cure.

Bowel screening can help save lives by detecting bowel cancer early.