

Bowel cancer screening

The facts



**It's your choice whether to take part
in bowel cancer screening.
This information aims to help you decide.**

Why screen for bowel cancer?

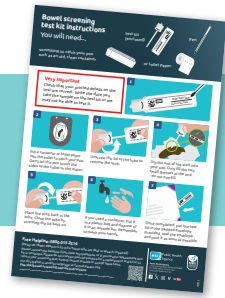
- We offer screening to try and find signs of bowel cancer at an early stage when there are no symptoms. This is when treatment can be more effective.
- Screening can also find polyps. These are abnormal clumps of cells in the bowel. Polyps are not cancers, but may develop into cancers over time. Polyps can be easily removed, which reduces the risk of bowel cancer developing.
- Regular bowel cancer screening reduces the risk of dying from bowel cancer.

Who is screening aimed at?

In Northern Ireland, bowel cancer screening is aimed at people aged 60-74 who do not currently have any symptoms. Everyone in this age group who is registered with a GP will be invited to take part in screening every two years.

What is the bowel?

The bowel is part of your digestive system. It takes nutrients and water from food and turns what is left into poo (also known as faeces, stools or bowel motions).



What is bowel cancer?

- Bowel cancer is also known as colon, rectal or colorectal cancer.
- About 1 in 20 people will develop bowel cancer in their lifetime.
- Bowel cancer is the fourth most common type of cancer found in men and women in Northern Ireland.
- Bowel cancer is more common in older people, especially men.

Risks of developing bowel cancer

Everyone, whatever your sex, is at risk of developing bowel cancer. Things that can increase your risk include:

- getting older (8 out of 10 people diagnosed with bowel cancer are over 60);
- not being active enough;
- being overweight;
- a diet high in red and processed meat and low in fibre, vegetables and fruits;
- smoking;
- drinking too much alcohol;
- having type 2 diabetes;
- having inflammatory bowel disease (ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease);
- a family history of bowel cancer.

What does the screening test look for?

The screening test detects blood in your poo (blood you would not notice by eye). This can be an early warning sign that something may be wrong. If the test picks up some bleeding, this does not mean that you definitely have bowel cancer. It just means this should be looked into to find the cause of the bleeding.

How is screening carried out?

You will receive a test kit in the post. The kit is the first step in a screening process that may involve further tests and one or more hospital visits.

How do I do the test?

- The test is done in the privacy of your home. You take a very small sample of poo using the test stick provided. Instructions on how to use the test are included with the test kit.
- There is a free helpline **0800 015 2514** to call if you have any questions on how to use the test kit or if you need a replacement test or return envelope.
- A video is also available at [nidirect.gov.uk/bowel-screening](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/bowel-screening)
- Please call the helpline if you are not sure whether you should complete the screening test. For example, if you have had surgery and have an artificial opening that allows poo from the bowel to pass into a bag (a stoma) then you might want to call us before completing the test.

When will I get my results?

You should get a letter with your results within two weeks of sending in the test – if you do not, please call the helpline.

How reliable is the test?

- A screening test cannot tell if you have bowel cancer. It simply sorts people into two groups – those who do not need any more tests and those who should have further tests.
- Bowel cancer can cause a range of symptoms. As the screening test looks for blood, the screening test may not identify all bowel cancers if there is no bleeding.
- No test is 100% reliable so if you have any of the symptoms listed on page 7 you should contact your GP, even if your last test was clear. It's possible for cancer to develop between tests.

What do the results mean?

No further tests needed at this time. Most people (about 98 out of 100) have this result. It means that we did not find any blood in your sample, or only a tiny amount which is within the screening range. This result does not guarantee that you do not have bowel cancer, or that it will never develop in the future. Being aware of the symptoms of bowel cancer is very important. You will be offered bowel cancer screening again every two years until you reach 74.

Further tests needed. About 2 in every 100 people have this result. It means we found an amount of blood in your poo above the screening range. This does not mean that you have cancer, however further tests should be considered to look for the cause of the blood. Several things can cause blood in poo, such as:

- haemorrhoids (piles);
- bowel polyps;
- bowel cancer.

You will be called to the Specialist Screening Practitioner (SSP) to talk about the next steps. The most common test is called a colonoscopy.



What is a colonoscopy?

- A colonoscopy uses a very small camera on the end of a thin tube to let the doctor or nurse look for any polyps or signs of cancer inside your bowel. Sometimes a small sample is taken to be examined under a microscope to look for cancer cells.
- As with most medical procedures, there is a possibility of complications. For every 10,000 colonoscopies carried out, bleeding may occur in about 67 of them, and in less than 10 cases the procedure may perforate the bowel. If this occurs, an operation is nearly always needed to repair the hole. In extremely rare cases (evidence suggests as little as 1 in 10,000 cases), a colonoscopy can result in death.
- If you are offered a colonoscopy you will have an opportunity to discuss any questions or concerns with the SSP.

What if the colonoscopy shows that I need more treatment?

If you need further treatment you will be sent to whichever specialist is right for you. For example, if polyps were removed at colonoscopy you may be called back for repeat colonoscopy in the future.

A diagnosis of bowel cancer is unlikely. But if it does happen, we will refer you to a team of specialists who will look after you. The main treatment for bowel cancer is surgery. In some cases, the specialists may offer you chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

Not all bowel cancers found at screening are curable. But for people who have bowel cancer found at its earliest stage, over 90% are still alive five years later.

Possible benefits and risks of bowel cancer screening

Being aware of the possible risks and benefits can help you decide whether or not to take part in bowel cancer screening.

Benefits

- reduces your risk of dying from bowel cancer
- allows abnormalities (such as polyps) found at colonoscopy to be removed, which reduces the risk of developing bowel cancer
- can be completed at home in private

Risks

- treatment might cause complications, for example during or after colonoscopy
- screening might miss a cancer if it was not bleeding when you completed the test

What symptoms to look out for

Symptoms of bowel cancer can include:

- blood in your poo, which may look red or black;
- looser poo, pooing more often and/or constipation;
- bleeding from your bottom;
- often feeling like you need to poo, even if you've just been to the toilet;
- a pain or lump in your tummy;
- bloating;
- feeling more tired than usual for some time;
- losing weight for no obvious reason.

Bowel cancer screening is not a test for symptoms. If you have had any of these symptoms for three weeks or more, please speak with your GP, who can provide a different test. This is very

important to ensure that further tests can be arranged if needed. Even if you have recently had bowel cancer screening and/or a colonoscopy, you should still get your symptoms checked out. Please remember that these symptoms don't necessarily mean that you have bowel cancer.

How can I reduce my risk of bowel cancer?

As well as taking the screening test every two years, you can reduce your risk by following advice for a healthy lifestyle – find out more at www.choosetolivebetter.com

- Eat a healthy diet, including five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, and wholegrains, beans and pulses for fibre. Limit red meat, especially processed red meat.
- Be active.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Limit your alcohol intake.
- Stop smoking – for help see www.stopsmokingni.info

How do I make sure that I get sent a test kit in the future?

Your GP practice gives us your contact details so please make sure they always have your correct name, date of birth and address.

What happens to my sample once it has been tested?

Once your sample has been tested, it will be destroyed. The results will be put into a computer and you will be sent another test in two years' time.

Data protection information

- A copy of your results will be sent to your GP.
- The Bowel Cancer Screening Programme needs to keep records of all people who have been screened and their results.
- Staff working for the programme may see and review your records.
- This information is used to make sure that the programme is working to the high standard that it should be.
- The information also shows how many cases of cancer have been picked up and makes sure that people are followed up with the proper treatment.
- We may review your previous screening results if you are diagnosed with bowel cancer between screening appointments. You will be able to see the results of this audit if you wish.
- If you need any further information on how your records are kept and used, you should contact the free helpline on **0800 015 2514**

Will you be helping someone to use the test?

If you are a carer, you should only help someone else to use the bowel screening test kit if they want you to, and have agreed you can do this.

For help or advice

Please contact the free helpline on **0800 015 2514** if you have any questions.

For further information visit:

nidirect.gov.uk/bowel-screening

For this leaflet in another language or format visit:

<http://pha.site/bowel-cancer-screening-facts>

or the back page of this leaflet.

For those who are deaf or speech impaired, Relay UK may be used. Please dial our helpline on **18001 0800 015 2514**.

Further information for those that are transgender, non-binary and gender fluid is available at

www.pha.site/screeningleaflet

For replacement kits

Please contact the free helpline on 0800 015 2514 if you need to request a replacement bowel screening test kit or envelope. Please do not contact your GP practice for a replacement screening test or to return your screening test, as they cannot provide or accept these screening test kits.

Opting out of screening

Taking part in screening is a personal choice. Please contact the free helpline on **0800 015 2514** if you would like to discuss opting out of the bowel cancer screening programme.



For this leaflet in another language or format visit:
<http://pha.site/bowel-cancer-screening-facts>
or scan the QR code below.



Public Health Agency
12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

Find us on:

