

Bowel Cancer Insights: Discovering Key Information



Bowel cancer is one of the most common types of cancer and can be life-threatening if not detected and treated early. The good news, however, is that bowel cancer survival rates have improved significantly over the past few decades.

If you or someone you care about has diagnosed or suspected bowel cancer, it's natural to have a lot of questions.

This information outlines essential things to know about Bowel Cancer, including symptoms, causes, risk factors and more.

What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is a type of cancer that originates from the colon (large intestine) or rectum (back passage). It is also known as colorectal cancer.

Bowel cancer usually starts with benign growths in the bowel called polyps. Polyps are typically harmless, but they can turn cancerous and grow into a tumour if they are not detected.

Adenocarcinoma – which starts in the gland cells lining the bowel – is by far the most common type of bowel cancer.

Other types of cancer can also occur in the bowel, including lymphomas, squamous cell cancers and neuroendocrine tumours, although these are less common.

Bowel cancer symptoms

Recognising the symptoms of bowel cancer is vital for early detection.

Bowel cancer symptoms include:

- changed bowel habits – including diarrhoea, constipation, or altered consistency of your stool (poo)
- blood in the stool – including blood on the toilet paper or a dark, tar-like appearance in your stool
- feeling like you can't completely empty your bowels
- abdominal discomfort – such as cramps, gas, or tummy pain
- a lump or pain in the anus or rectum
- unexplained weight loss
- unusual tiredness or signs of anaemia (weakness, pale complexion, or breathlessness).

Remember, early detection of bowel cancer gives you the best chance of a successful outcome, so see your GP if you have any of these symptoms for two weeks or more.

They can get you started on screening for bowel cancer and refer you for specialist help if needed.

What causes bowel cancer?

While experts don't fully understand the causes of bowel cancer, several factors are known to increase your risk.

Bowel cancer risk factors

These include:

- age – your risk increases as you get older
- a family history of bowel cancer or polyps
- eating a lot of red or processed meats
- smoking and drinking a lot of alcohol
- not getting enough physical activity
- some health conditions – including overweight and obesity and inflammatory bowel diseases (such as Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis).

See your GP if you have any concerns about your risk of bowel cancer.

Bowel cancer screening

In Australia, the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program is designed to reduce bowel cancer deaths by detecting the disease in its early stages. Under the program, a free bowel cancer test kit is sent out to all eligible Australians.

The bowel cancer screening kit includes everything you need to collect a small sample of poo. The sample is sent to a lab and tested for blood, which may indicate there is a cancer in the bowel.

- Previously, you could only get a bowel cancer test kit if you were aged between 50 and 74. However, from July 1, 2024, the program is being extended to eligible Australians aged 45 to 74.
- For people at average risk of bowel cancer and without symptoms, Australian medical guidelines recommend screening every 2 years between ages 45-74.

National screening for bowel cancer has led to major improvements in the bowel cancer survival rate. Over 90% of bowel cancer cases can be treated successfully if they are found early enough. That's why it's so important to take part in national bowel cancer screening, and to see your GP if you have any bowel cancer symptoms.

Speak with your GP if you are experiencing symptoms for two weeks or more.

If you've recently done a bowel cancer screening test, you should receive your test results within two weeks. A copy of results will also be sent to the general practitioner (GP) that you nominated on your form. You may be referred on to see one of our experienced John Fawkner Private Hospital Gastroenterologists or Colorectal surgeons for further tests and treatment.

Find out more about the [National Bowel Cancer Screening Program](#).

Bowel cancer support

Receiving a bowel cancer diagnosis can be scary. It's natural to experience a wide range of emotions, but you don't have to cope with it alone. Support is available to help patients and their families deal with the challenges you might face.

[Bowel Cancer Australia](#) is dedicated to supporting people affected by bowel cancer and operates a nationwide telenursing support service. Call 1800 727 336 or [email a bowel care nurse](#).

[Cancer Australia](#) has more information about bowel cancer support services.

[Palliative Care Australia](#) has information for people living with a life-limiting condition and their families/carers.

If you feel overwhelmed or have concerns about your mental wellbeing, talk to your healthcare team about seeing a trained mental health professional.

Scan QR code

Learn more about screening results and next steps.



Blog: What happens if your bowel cancer screening test is positive?

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