

Screening for bowel cancer

England, Australia and many other countries have well-established screening programmes for bowel cancer.

Currently New Zealand does not have a fully implemented national bowel cancer screening programme – even though we are world leaders in rates of bowel cancer. A pilot programme began in 2012 in the Waitemata DHB region for people aged 50–74 years to inform development of a possible national bowel cancer screening programme.

Bowel Cancer New Zealand has been calling for the introduction of a national bowel cancer screening programme since 2010. International studies indicate that a national programme will prevent hundreds of New Zealanders from dying of bowel cancer each year. If you are invited to take part in a screening programme, we urge you to do so.

How it works

Screening helps identify bowel cancer and pre-cancerous growths early, before symptoms may be showing and when these growths and cancers are most curable.

There are several possible screening tests available. The most widely used is a Faecal Immunochemical Test (FIT). FIT can detect small amounts of blood in your bowel motions. The FIT looks for blood – not for bowel cancer itself. It is a simple, painless test that you do at home and then send away for analysis. Results are sent back to your GP who will discuss these with you. Visit our website for more information.

It is important to know that not all people with bowel cancer can be identified by screening. Therefore, even if you participate in screening, if you develop any symptoms we recommend that you see your GP immediately to discuss these.

Bowel cancer is detectable, treatable and beatable.

About us

Bowel Cancer New Zealand is a national patient-led charity aiming to decrease the impact of bowel cancer on the New Zealand community through awareness, education, support, research and promotion of access to appropriate screening and treatments.

Through our work we aim to help save lives from this common form of cancer, the second biggest cancer killer in New Zealand.



Bowel Cancer
NEW ZEALAND

Support Bowel Cancer New Zealand by making a donation on our website

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Bowel Cancer Australia



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Statistics on incidence of bowel cancer based on Ministry of Health statistics 2014



Bowel Cancer
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Learn how to spot New Zealand's most common cancer.



Symptoms of bowel cancer

The most common symptoms are a change of bowel habit and rectal bleeding. However these are also common in people who do not have cancer.

If you have any of the following persistent symptoms you should get advice from your GP and ask about the need for further hospital investigation and possible referral to hospital specialists.

Change of bowel habit:

- Recent persistent change of bowel habit e.g. looser more diarrhoea-like motions; feeling unable to go or having a sense of incomplete emptying; going or trying to go to the toilet more often.
- Change of bowel habit is especially important if you also have bleeding.

Rectal bleeding:

- Rectal bleeding that persists accompanied by other symptoms such as, straining with hard stools, sore bottom, lumps and itching.
- Rectal bleeding in over 60s – piles in older people can be hiding more serious symptoms, so it is especially important to get this investigated.

Other symptoms of concern include:

- Unexplained anaemia found by your GP.
- A lump or mass in your abdomen felt by you or your GP.
- Persistent, severe abdominal pain.

When to visit your GP

If you are experiencing any of the symptoms described in this leaflet you should make an appointment to see your GP.

- Don't be embarrassed or scared. Your GP is used to discussing all sorts of conditions every day and will have heard it all before.
- It is better to visit your GP early and be reassured and/or treated than to hope the symptoms will disappear or get better without treatment.

A visit to your GP could save your life.

Questions your GP may ask you

1. Has the frequency with which you go to the toilet to pass or try to pass motions increased; or have your motions become persistently looser over a few weeks, without going back to normal?

This is the single most important clue. All people (regardless of their age) with this symptom persisting for a few weeks should be referred for hospital investigation.

2. If you haven't had a change in bowel habit, but you do have bleeding from the bottom, have you got any other symptoms such as straining, lumps, soreness, pain or itchiness?

If you do have these symptoms it is highly likely that you have piles. If you only have bleeding and no piles or other perianal symptoms (as your GP may describe it) you should be considered for further investigation.

3. How long have you been experiencing your symptoms?

Many symptoms are due to common conditions and are not bowel cancer. However it is important to explain to your GP as precisely as possible when symptoms started, particularly if they are recent or persistent to ensure correct diagnosis.

4. Can I give you a rectal examination?

Again your GP should offer people with bleeding a rectal examination (a painless, internal check with a gloved finger) in order to feel for any lumps or masses, along with a blood test to check for anaemia – both are possible symptoms of bowel cancer.

5. Does bowel cancer run in your family?

Your GP should ask you this as a matter of course, but remember to mention any family history of bowel cancer during your appointment and to ask about screening options.

Let's talk about bowels and bottoms

Most of us at some time in our lives, suffer from problems with our bowels and bottoms. Although it is sometimes embarrassing to talk about, you'd be surprised how many people will have experienced the same symptoms as you.

There are lots of common conditions that could cause changes to the workings of the bowels, pain and bleeding from the bottom. In most cases it won't be cancer.

What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer can occur in any part of the colon or rectum. If untreated it will grow and may cause a blockage or can ulcerate leading to blood loss or anaemia.

How common is bowel cancer?

New Zealand has one of the highest incidences of bowel cancer in the world and bowel cancer is our most common form of cancer. Each year about 3000 people are diagnosed with the disease and more than 1200 will die as a result – that's more than 100 New Zealanders dying every month – men and women, young and old.

The comforting news is that bowel cancer is one of the most curable cancers if caught early.

Therefore it is vitally important to recognise and look out for possible symptoms and to have symptoms investigated if they persist.