

Bowel Cancer Screening – What You Need to Know

Bowel (colorectal) cancer affects the large bowel, which is made up of the colon and rectum and is one of the most common cancers in the UK — but the good news is that when it's found early, it's also one of the most treatable. Around 44,100 people are diagnosed with bowel cancer in the UK each year. It is the 4th most common cancer in the UK and most of us know somebody who has been diagnosed with it. It usually affects older people but the cases being diagnosed in younger people are on the rise. The NHS bowel cancer screening programme is designed to detect signs of this disease *before* symptoms develop, giving you the best chance of successful treatment.

Who is invited for bowel cancer screening?

- If you are aged 50 to 74 and registered with a GP in England, you will be invited to take part in the screening programme every 2 years.
- If you are aged 75 or over, you will not automatically be invited, but you can still request a home screening kit every 2 years by calling the free helpline: 0800 707 6060.

What does the test involve?

- The test used is called a Faecal Immunochemical Test (FIT). It checks your poo for tiny amounts of blood which may not be visible to the naked eye — which may be a sign of bowel cancer or polyps (small growths that can sometimes develop into cancer).
- A home testing kit is sent to you by post, with instructions. You collect a small sample, post it back in the prepaid envelope, and usually get your result in about 2 weeks. It's as simple as that.
- If blood is found, you'll be invited to further testing — often a colonoscopy (a camera examination of the bowel).

Why is screening so important?

- Screening catches bowel cancer early — before you might have any symptoms — when treatment is more likely to be successful.
- It also can find polyps, which aren't cancer yet but *can* develop into cancer over time; detecting and removing them reduces risk.

- With the age range lowering and the FIT test being more accurate and easier to use than older tests, more cancers and pre-cancerous changes are being caught.

What the results mean

- No further tests needed: This means no significant blood was found in your sample. Most people have this result. You'll be automatically invited again in 2 years (if still aged 50-74). But it's important to remember: no screening test is perfect — if you get symptoms between screenings, see your GP.
- Further tests needed: This means blood was found, and you will be asked to speak to a specialist and usually attend for a colonoscopy to find out what's going on. It doesn't always mean you have cancer — there are many reasons blood might appear in the sample.

Common Worries

- “I have no symptoms — do I still need a test?”
Yes — that's exactly when screening is most useful. Cancer often doesn't cause noticeable symptoms until later.
- “It sounds messy or embarrassing.”
The FIT kit is designed to be simple — just one small sample at home, postal return, no hospital visit unless needed.
- “If the result is okay, I don't ever need to worry.”
Not quite — even if you've had a negative result, you should still watch out for symptoms (see below) and take part when you're next invited.
- “I didn't receive a kit — what do I do?”
If you're aged 50-74 and registered with a GP but haven't been invited or sent a kit, call the helpline: 0800 707 6060.

What if I notice symptoms?

Even if you've been screened and had a negative result, see your GP immediately if you notice any of the following:

- Blood in your poo or bleeding from your bottom.
- A change in your bowel habits lasting more than 3 weeks.
- Unexplained weight loss, persistent tummy pain or bloating, or feeling unusually tired.
These symptoms don't always mean cancer — but they *should* always be checked.

A final word from us at the practice

Taking part in bowel cancer screening is one of the simplest ways you can take care of your health — and it could save your life. If you receive a kit, please don't put it aside: use it, post it back.

If you haven't received it and you believe you're eligible, call the helpline or speak to one of us at the practice and we'll help.

Together, we can catch cancers earlier, treat them more effectively and give better outcomes for our community.

If you have any questions or need help with your kit, come and ask at the surgery — we're here for you. Please don't be embarrassed to talk to us about it; everybody has to poo and there shouldn't be any stigma about it. We are here to help.

Dr Maya Chowdhury