



The Association of Coloproctology of Great Britain and Ireland (ACPGBI) is a group of 1000+ surgeons, nurses, and allied health professionals who advance the knowledge and treatment of bowel diseases in Britain and Ireland.

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Bowel Cancer Screening

Patient information

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This is a way to pick up bowel cancer when it is relatively easy to cure and before it gives rise to symptoms.

Is bowel cancer important?

YES. After lung cancer, bowel cancer kills more people in Britain each year than any other form of cancer. That is – it kills more people than breast cancer; it kills more people than cancer of the prostate; and it kills more people than cervix cancer. Yet it is often forgotten and rarely talked about.

What is screening and how does it work?

Screening aims to detect a disease before symptoms appear. For cancer, this might mean catching it at an earlier stage, when treatment offers a better chance of cure.

How can you screen for bowel cancer?

Most bowel cancers bleed to a greater or lesser extent. A special test (“faecal occult blood test”) that detects tiny amounts of blood in the bowel motion has been proven to detect cancers at an earlier stage.

We currently have two arms to screening in the UK. The first is a one-off test called bowel scope screening which is currently being offered in England to men and women aged 55 years. During this a thin telescope is passed into the left side of the bowel and it identifies any cancer and allows removal of any growths called polyps that may in the future become cancerous.

The second uses the faecal occult blood test (FOBT) and is offered to men and women aged 60-74 years (with the exception of Scotland where FOBT screening starts at 50). This test

is very easy to perform. Every 2 years a kit is sent to your home in the post for you to perform and return. After the age of 74 you can request a kit if you wish every two years. If your test is positive you may be called for a telescope test of the bowel called a colonoscopy. For every 1000 people screened only 16 need this procedure and only 2 will have a cancer.

It is important to note that even if your bowel scope test is normal you must still participate in FOBT screening to ensure you get the most benefit out of screening. If following a screen test you notice new symptoms such as change in bowel habit or bleeding you should still see your doctor.

Does screening for bowel cancer work?

YES. Many studies have proved that people with bowel cancer detected by screening using “faecal occult blood tests” and bowel scope screening are more likely to be cured than those who wait for symptoms to develop.

What are the benefits of screening?

You may be one of those who has a bowel cancer growing that has not yet produced symptoms. In general, bowel cancers detected by screening have a better outlook than cancers found in people with symptoms.

What are the disadvantages?

It is important to know that the majority of people with a positive bowel motion test have nothing seriously wrong with their bowel. However, once the bowel has been checked out they can have peace of mind.

Although the bowel motion tests are better at predicting cancer than any symptom, sometimes patients with cancer can return a negative test. Therefore, you should always report any worrying bowel symptoms to your doctor.

The most important are: bleeding from the back passage and change in the normal bowel pattern, particularly when these have continued over a six week period or more.

Further information

<https://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk>

<https://www.cancerresearchuk.org>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/bowel-cancer-screening/pages/introduction.aspx>