



# Bowel cancer screening: the facts



## What is this leaflet about?

This leaflet is about the benefits and risks of the Northern Ireland bowel cancer screening programme and why it is important to take part when invited.

## Why screen for bowel cancer?

- If bowel cancer is detected at a very early stage then treatment can be 90% successful.
- This means that around 60 deaths could be prevented in Northern Ireland each year.
- Screening can also pick up polyps. Polyps are clumps of cells that are not cancer but some may turn into cancer. If polyps are picked up early they can be easily removed before this happens.

## How common is bowel cancer?

- About 1 in 20 people will develop bowel cancer in their lifetime.
- Bowel cancer is the second most common type of cancer found in men and women in Northern Ireland.
- Bowel cancer is more common in older people, especially men.

## What is the screening test called?

The test is called a 'faecal occult blood' test, or 'FOBT' for short. 'Occult' means 'hidden'.

## What does the screening test look for?

The test looks for very tiny amounts of blood in your bowel motions. This is 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 that you should be checked out to find the cause.



## Who is screening aimed at?

In Northern Ireland, screening is aimed at everyone aged 60–74. All people in this group who are registered with a GP will have the chance to be screened every two years.

## How is screening carried out?

All people aged 60–74 who are registered with a GP 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 put a very small sample of bowel motion (stools) onto a special card. A more detailed instruction leaflet is included with the test kit.
- There is a freephone helpline **0800 015 2514** to call if you have any questions on how to use the test kit.

## When will I get my results?

- You should get your results within two weeks of sending in the test.
- If you don't get a letter within two weeks, call the helpline.

## How reliable is the test?

- A screening test can not 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.
- No test is 100% reliable so if you have any of the symptoms listed on page 6 you should contact your GP, even if your last test was clear.



## What happens next?

- If your test is negative (no blood has been found) you don't need to do anything. The same test will be repeated every two years until you are aged 74.
- If your test is positive (blood has been found), you will be called to the specialist screening practitioner (SSP) to talk about further tests. About 10 people out of every 500 people tested will be called to the SSP. Even then, 9 out of every 10 people called will not have cancer.
- If your test is unclear, you may be asked to repeat a similar test just to double check for any blood.

## What happens if your test is positive?

- A positive test result means blood has been found in your stools. You will then be called for an assessment with the specialist screening practitioner who will explain what further tests can be done. 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 of the bowel is taken to be examined under a microscope to look for cancer cells.
- As with most medical procedures, there is a possibility of complications. Bleeding may occur in about 1 in 150 cases, and in 1 in 1,000 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 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 one to three years time.

## What symptoms to look out for

Bowel cancer can develop at any time between screening tests. Do not ignore the following symptoms:

- Unexpected, painless bleeding from your back passage, or blood in your stools. If you see blood in your stools, you should see your GP immediately. Finding a little bright red blood just on the toilet paper probably does not matter. If it continues for two or three weeks, see your GP.
- A change in your bowel habit. You may develop loose bowel motions, or you may pass a slimy substance called mucus. Sometimes you may become constipated. Look out for constipation and diarrhoea combined. If you experience these symptoms for more than six weeks, you should see your GP. If you have these symptoms as well as others in this list, see your GP as soon as possible.
- Pain or swelling in your abdomen (tummy/belly).
- Unexplained weight loss.
- Unexplained anaemia. This can make you feel extremely tired. It is usually discovered by a blood test done by your GP.
- All these symptoms can be caused by other conditions. For example, haemorrhoids (piles) often bleed.

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

- The screening test kit will be sent to the address which your GP has for you. If you move house, you must let your GP know as soon as possible so that the address list is kept up to date. If not, you may miss your chance to take part in the screening programme.

## 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 office 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 freephone helpline on **0800 015 2514**.

For further information or this leaflet in another language or format visit:

**[www.cancerscreening.hscni.net](http://www.cancerscreening.hscni.net)**

For those who are deaf or speech impaired, Next Generation Text (NGT) may be used.

Please dial our helpline on  
**18001 0800 015 2514.**



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