

Why screen for bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer screening aims to detect bowel cancer at an early stage (in people with no symptoms) when treatment is more likely to be effective. Screening can also detect polyps. Polyps are clumps of cells that are not cancer but may develop into cancer over time. If polyps are picked up early they can easily be removed reducing the risk of bowel cancer developing.

Regular bowel cancer screening has been shown to reduce the risk of dying from bowel cancer by 16%.

Who is screening aimed at?

The Northern Ireland Bowel Cancer Screening Programme offers screening every two years to all men and women aged 60 to 74. People in this age group will automatically be sent an invitation and a screening kit so they can do the test at home. Your GP will provide your contact details so it is important that he or she has your correct name and address. After your first screening test you will be sent another invitation and screening kit every two years for as long as you remain within the screening age group.

How does the screening test work?

- The Faecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT) detects tiny amounts of blood which you cannot normally see in your bowel motions. ('occult blood' means hidden blood)
- Polyps and bowel cancers sometimes bleed which is why we screen for blood in your bowel motions.
- If the test picks up some bleeding this does not mean that you definitely have bowel cancer. It just means you should be checked out to find the cause.

How reliable is bowel cancer screening?

A screening test cannot 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 are concerned about bowel symptoms you should contact your GP, even if your last test was negative.

Is screening for bowel cancer appropriate for everyone?

Bowel cancer screening may not be appropriate for everybody. Individuals may not need to complete the test kit if they:

- Have had their large bowel removed;
- Have had a colonoscopy or a barium enema plus a Sigmoidoscopy within the last two years;
- Are on a bowel polyp surveillance programme;
- Are currently being treated for bowel cancer;
- Are currently being treated for ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease;
- Are currently awaiting bowel investigations.

If you are unsure whether you need to complete the test kit or not you should speak to your GP or call the freephone helpline on 0800 015 2514.

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