

# 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?

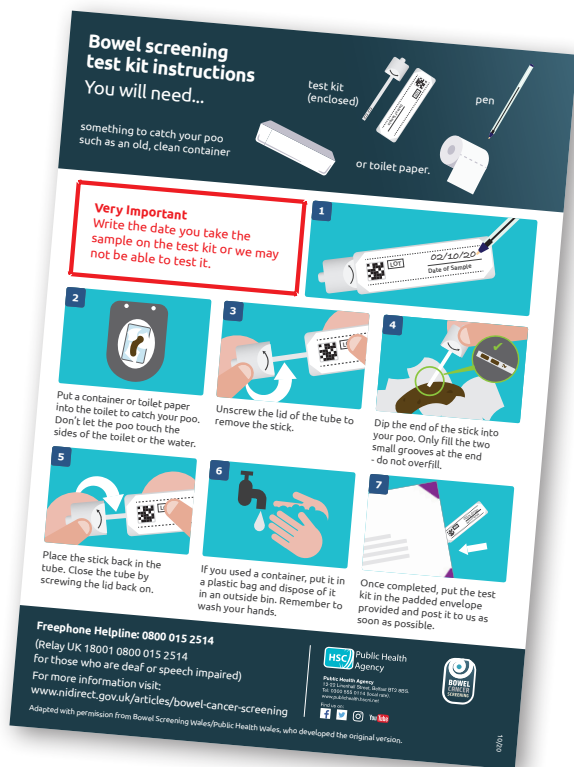
- If bowel cancer is detected at a very early stage then treatment is very successful. More than 9 out of 10 people diagnosed at the earliest stage will survive for 5 years or more after they were diagnosed.
- This means that around 60 deaths could be prevented in Northern Ireland each year.
- Screening 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 does the screening test look for?

The test looks for very tiny amounts of blood in your poo. 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 take a very small sample of poo using the test stick provided. Instructions on how to use the test are 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 result shows that you don't need any further tests at this time you don't need to do anything. The same test will be repeated every two years until you are aged 74.
- If your result shows that you do need further tests, you will be called to the specialist screening practitioner (SSP) to talk about the next steps. The most common test is called a colonoscopy. About 3 people out of every 100 tested will be called to the SSP. Even then, 9 out of every 10 people called will not have cancer.

## 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. For every 10,000 colonoscopies carried out, bleeding may occur in about 67 of them, and in less than 10 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

Symptoms of bowel cancer can include:

- blood in your poo
- looser poo, pooing more often and/or constipation
- a pain or lump in your tummy
- feeling more tired than usual for some time
- losing weight for no obvious reason

Please remember that these symptoms don't necessarily mean that you have bowel cancer. But if you have any of these symptoms for 3 weeks or more, please speak with your GP. It is important to do this even if you have recently had bowel cancer screening and/or a colonoscopy.

## How can I reduce my risk of bowel cancer?

As well as taking the screening test every two years, you can reduce your risk by following the advice below. Find advice about a healthy lifestyle at **[www.choosetolivebetter.com](http://www.choosetolivebetter.com)**

- Eat a healthy diet. Make sure you get five portions of fruit and vegetable each day, and include wholegrains, beans and pulses for fibre. Limit the amount of red meat you eat, especially processed red meat.
- Be active. Moving more and sitting less can reduce your risk of serious illness. Aim for at least 2 and a half hours each week.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Avoid gaining weight and try losing weight if overweight.
- Drink less. To keep risks to a low level, don't drink more than 14 units of alcohol a week.
- Stop smoking. Your local free Stop Smoking Service can help - find them at **[www.stopsmokingni.info](http://www.stopsmokingni.info)**

## 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**.



## Will you be helping someone to use the test?

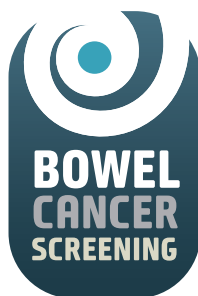
If you are a carer, you should only help someone else to use the bowel screening test kit if they want you to, and have agreed you can do this.

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

**[www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/bowel-cancer-screening](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/bowel-cancer-screening)**

For those who are deaf or speech impaired, Relay UK may be used.

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



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12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.  
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).  
[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

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