Bowel cancer screening age extension

Public Health Agency

Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

About bowel cancer screening

Who is eligible for bowel screening in Northern Ireland?

As of Monday 2 November 2026, the Bowel Cancer Screening Programme in Northern Ireland is offering bowel screening to people aged 59-74 who live in Northern Ireland and are registered with a GP.

You need to be registered with a GP in Northern Ireland to be eligible for bowel cancer screening.

When will somebody aged 59 receive their FIT kit?

The Bowel Cancer Screening Programme is starting age expansion from 2 November 2026. Invitations will be issued based on a person's date of birth and in line with the following schedule (some variation may occur):

Birth year	Month kit posted
1967	November 2026 - October 2027
1968	January - December 2027
1969	April 2027 - March 2028

Birth year 1967	
Birthday month	**Month kit posted (approximately) :**
January	November - early December 2026
February	December 2026
March	December 2026
April	January 2027
May	January 2027
June	mid January - February 2027
July	March 2027
August	late March - early April 2027
September	April - May 2027
October	late May - mid July 2027
November	mid July - early September 2027
December	September - October 2027

For individuals born in 1968, their first screening kit will be posted within two weeks of their 59th birthday.

Test kits are sent by 2nd class post so they may not be delivered in the same month stated in the table above.

People who are aged 59 on 2 November 2026, or who have turned 59 in 2026 will be invited to take part in bowel screening between November 2026 and March 2027. Please wait for your invite to be issued as the invitations need to be issued across this time period to avoid overwhelming the laboratory and hospital services if further investigations are recommended. People turning 59 after this date will be invited as part of the rollout.

How many people will be invited for screening as a result of expanding to age 59?

This will result in approximately 29,000 additional people aged 59 being invited for screening between November 2026 and March 2027, with 119,000 people being invited in total during this period.

I am over 74, can I be screened?

At present in Northern Ireland, the bowel cancer screening programme invites people aged 59-74 for routine screening. There currently isn't an opt-in option for those over this age although we do understand this is available in some other parts of the UK.

The decision here is based on national guidance - evidence from the UK National Screening Committee does not currently support inviting people over the age of 74 to take part in bowel cancer screening.

If you, or your family member, are 75 or older and have any concerns about bowel symptoms, we recommend speaking with your GP as they can advise on whether any further investigations are needed.

What if I do not want to take part in bowel screening?

Taking part in bowel screening is your choice. The Northern Ireland Bowel Cancer Screening Programme routinely invites all eligible individuals for screening.

If you do not complete your screening test kit within 7 weeks of receiving it, you will receive a reminder letter. If you do not return a completed test kit after this reminder letter, we will invite you again in two years' time, if you are within the eligible age range and living in Northern Ireland. Your GP will be informed if you have not accepted the invite.

If you do not wish to receive invitations for bowel screening, please contact us to let us know. We will send you a form to sign to confirm that you do not want further invites from us.

Individuals who ask for the invitations to be stopped, but then later decide that they would like to have screening, can come back into the programme at any time until the age of 74.

I am not registered with a GP, will I still be invited?

No, you need to be registered with a GP to receive an invitation from the Northern Ireland Bowel Cancer Screening Programme.

If you live in Northern Ireland and are not registered with a GP you can find more information at nidirect.gov.uk/articles/your-local-doctor-gp.

I live in the Republic of Ireland but work in Northern Ireland – what does this mean for me?

If you live in the Republic of Ireland but travel regularly for work in Northern Ireland, you may be entitled to register with a GP in Northern Ireland. If you are registered with a GP then you will then receive screening invitations when eligible.

About the test kit

I have lost or damaged my kit. Can I get another one?

Yes, you can request a new test kit by calling the Freephone helpline 0800 015 2514.

Can I get a replacement bowel screening test kit from my GP?

No. If you need a replacement bowel screening test kit, please contact the Freephone helpline on 0800 015 2514. GP practices use a different FIT test for people with bowel symptoms. Tests provided by GP practices cannot be processed through the bowel cancer screening programme.

How do I complete the test kit?

- Follow the step-by-step instructions included with your test kit.
- Watch this short video that will show you how to complete the test.
- Contact us if you have any questions or need help completing the test by calling the Freephone helpline 0800 015 2514.

Can I reuse the test stick if I've made a mistake?

No, you will need to request a new test kit by calling the Freephone helpline.

How does the laboratory test my sample?

A laboratory machine will test how much blood is found in your poo sample. The amount of blood found will decide if you need further tests.

I find this test too difficult to do, what support is available?

You can contact the freephone helpline 0800 015 2514 to discuss how we may be able to help.

Should I stop my medication before doing the bowel screening test?

No, you should continue taking your medication and do the test. If you are taking Warfarin, Aspirin, anti-inflammatories, some antibiotics or blood thinning medication there may be a higher chance of a screening result that needs further tests.

I have lost my pre-paid envelope; can I just use an ordinary envelope?

No, the prepaid envelope has been designed to meet postal regulations. Please contact the free helpline on 0800 015 2514 if you need to request a replacement bowel screening test kit or envelope.

Please do not contact your GP practice for a replacement screening test or to return your screening test, as they cannot provide or accept these screening test kits.

I forgot to write the date on the test, will I still get a result?

We may not be able to process the test kit without the date and if we cannot we will send you another test kit. If you are completing another test kit please make sure to write the date you took the sample on the test.

Can I help someone I care for do the test?

If you are a carer, you should only help someone else to use the bowel screening kit if they want to, and have agreed that you can do this. If you take care of someone who does not have capacity to give their consent to take part in screening, you should speak with their GP to decide if screening is in their best interests.

Your results

Will my GP be notified if I do not take part?

Yes, your GP records will be automatically updated if you have not responded to the invitation. Your GP may discuss your decision not to take part in bowel screening with you.

I saw blood in my poo but I have a result not needing further tests?

Sometimes blood on the outside of the poo can be caused by external bleeding such as piles. This may not be detected with the screening test. If you can see blood you need to tell your GP so that your symptoms can be checked. The screening test is aimed at people without any bowel symptoms and can only be done every 2 years.

Taking part

Can the test kit be completed if a person is menstruating (having a period)?

No, wait until the bleeding has stopped before completing the test kit.

I recently had a colonoscopy. Should I take part?

It is safe to take part in screening if you have recently had a colonoscopy. It is your decision if you would like to take part in screening when invited. You should consider that if the test suggests further tests are recommended, this will likely be another colonoscopy. Your clinical team may review the details of a previous procedure as part of your screening assessment to determine if any further investigations should be considered, if your screening result suggests further tests are recommended.

The screening test is the first step in the assessment process, however it is noted that there can be many reasons that a screening test suggests further tests are indicated. This is why a diagnostic test is then recommended, such as a colonoscopy. If you have recently had a diagnostic test your clinical team may review this in the context of your history to identify if your screening result is likely due to your known history or condition, or whether further assessment should be considered.

I have piles, should I take part?

Yes, if you have piles it is recommended that you take part in bowel screening. We advise you to take your sample from the middle of your poo. There may be an increased chance of blood being found, meaning that further tests are recommended; however, it is not possible to know from the screening test if the finding is due to piles or another abnormality.

I have an infection in my bowel should I take part?

If your doctor has told you that you have an infection in your bowel you should wait until this has resolved and all symptoms have settled before taking part in bowel screening.

I am under the care of the hospital and have regular colonoscopies, should I take part in bowel screening?

You should discuss taking part with your treating medical team or GP. If you are under regular review by a gastroenterology team and have regular colonoscopies, this is a higher level of monitoring than the screening test, which tests for the presence of a certain level of blood in a single bowel motion. If the screening test result suggests that further investigations are indicated then a colonoscopy is the gold-standard test. The programme cannot identify people who are under this type of surveillance before inviting them to participate in screening.

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I have had surgery and now have a colostomy. Can I still take part in screening?

Yes, if you still have part of your large bowel, you can take the sample from your stoma bag.

Please call the helpline if you are not sure whether you should complete the screening test. For example, if you have had surgery and have an artificial opening that allows poo from the bowel to pass into a bag (a stoma) then you might want to call us before completing the test.

How do I take a sample from my colostomy/stoma bag?

Once you've had a bowel motion/movement, remove your colostomy bag as you would normally do so when changing it. Using the instructions provided with the test kit, the sample should be taken via the pre-cut hole in the bag and not directly from the stoma. Do not cut the bag open as this would not be necessary.

Best practice would be to take the sample as soon as you've had a bowel motion/movement, however if this is not possible, you can take the sample as soon as you've changed the bag.

I have had an ileostomy. Can I still take part in screening?

No, if you have a permanent ileostomy and no longer have a large bowel there is no need for you to complete the test. Please contact us and we will write to your doctor to have this confirmed so that you no longer receive the invitations.

I am being treated for another type of cancer, can I still take part in screening?

We would recommend you talk to your oncologist or doctor. You can also contact the helpline if you have any queries about taking part in screening. The decision to take part in screening is a personal choice, however you may wish to consider if you would feel able to undergo further diagnostic tests if the screening result recommends this.

I have a family history of bowel cancer. Should I take part in screening?

Yes, you should still complete the test kit if you want to take part in screening. The screening programme cannot undertake long-term monitoring of people with a family history of bowel cancer outside of the screening age range, therefore you should contact your GP for assessment and referral.

I feel well and do not have any bowel symptoms. Do I need to do the test?

We offer screening to try and find signs of bowel cancer at an early stage before symptoms develop and when treatment is more likely to be successful. We would encourage you to do the test, however we respect your decision if you decide not to take part in screening.

If I decide not to take part this time will this prevent me from being invited in the future?

No, you will be invited for screening every two years, if you are still within the eligible age range, 59-74. Your decision not to take part this time will not affect any care you receive from your doctor or hospital.

I do not want to be contacted for bowel screening. Can my details be removed from the invitation list?

Taking part in screening is a personal choice. Please contact the free helpline on 0800 015 2514 if you would like to discuss opting out of the bowel cancer screening programme.

General questions

Where did you get my details from?

The Northern Ireland Bowel Cancer Screening Programme gets details of all eligible people from the Northern Ireland Demographic System. This is a regional GP database containing details of the names, addresses, dates of birth and GPs of all Northern Irish residents. This system is very strictly controlled and complies fully with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

The address details you hold are incorrect, how do I update them?

If your details are incorrect you will need to contact your GP surgery to update them.

What medical information do you have access to?

The Bowel Cancer Screening Programme does not have access to medical records. It has access to the national Northern Ireland GP database, which has details of the names, addresses, dates of birth and GPs of all eligible Northern Irish residents. This system is very strictly controlled and complies fully with the Data Protection Act.

What personal information do you hold on me?

The Bowel Cancer Screening Programme records your name, date of birth, contact address and the results of your bowel screening tests. Only appropriate health care professionals will see your personal bowel screening information. If you require more information on how your records are kept and used, you should contact the Freephone helpline on 0800 015 2514.

What do you use my personal information for?

We use your personal information to invite you to take part in screening and to improve screening services.

More information and support

For advice on bowel cancer screening, you can phone our free helpline on **0800 015 2514**

For online advice about bowel cancer screening please visit NI Direct

To review our information leaflets within bowel cancer screening please visit the PHA website links:

- Bowel cancer screening: the facts
- Bowel cancer screening: how to take the test
- Bowel cancer screening: the next step

For information for transgender, non-binary and gender fluid individuals about each of the population screening programmes please visit Screening information for transgender, non-binary and gender fluid service users | HSC Public Health Agency

For further information about cancer symptoms and awareness please visit Be Cancer Aware

HSC Public Health Agency

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Find us on:

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