

# Bowel Cancer

What you should know

## What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is when the normal cells in your bowel (intestines) grow in an abnormal way to form a lump called a tumour. The bowel is part of your digestive system. The bowel has two parts – the small bowel and the large bowel. Most cancers occur in the large bowel in the colon and rectum. Bowel cancer is also known as colorectal cancer or cancer of the colon or rectum.

## Some facts about bowel cancer

- ▶ Bowel cancer is one of the most common cancers in Ireland.
- ▶ Around 2,560 people are diagnosed with it each year.
- ▶ Bowel cancer can usually be treated successfully if it is found early.

# What increases my risk of bowel cancer?



## Age

Bowel cancer is more common in people over 50 years, but younger people can also get it.



## Previous cancer

If you have had bowel cancer before, you have a higher risk of getting it again.



## Family history

If your mother, father, brother, sister or child had bowel cancer, you have a greater risk of getting it, especially if they were under the age of 45. You also have a greater risk if aunts or uncles on the same side of the family had bowel cancer.



## Inherited bowel conditions

Your risk is higher if you or someone in your family has or had an inherited bowel condition such as familial adenomatous polyposis or Lynch syndrome, also called hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer.



## Other bowel conditions

A history of inflammatory bowel conditions such as polyps, ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease or coeliac disease.

**Risk factors increase your chance of getting bowel cancer. Having a risk factor doesn't mean you will get bowel cancer. Sometimes people with no risk factors may get the disease.**

## What are the symptoms of bowel cancer?

- ▶ Changes in your poo for no reason that lasts longer than 3 weeks, such as having constipation, diarrhoea or both.
- ▶ The feeling of not emptying your bowel completely after a bowel movement.
- ▶ Needing to poo more or less often than usual.
- ▶ Blood in your poo, which may look red or black.
- ▶ Bleeding from your bottom.
- ▶ Tummy pain.
- ▶ Feeling a lump anywhere in your tummy.
- ▶ Bloating.
- ▶ Losing weight for no reason.
- ▶ Feeling very tired for no reason.
- ▶ Breathlessness.

**These symptoms can be caused by other things, but always get them checked by your GP.**

## What should I do if I have any symptoms?

If you have any symptoms or changes in your body that you are worried about, it's important to have them checked by your GP. Tell them if you have a family history of bowel cancer. The chances are it will not be cancer. Getting your symptoms checked is not wasting anyone's time. The sooner cancer is spotted, the more likely it is to be treated successfully.

## How is bowel cancer diagnosed?

If your doctor thinks your symptoms need to be investigated, you will have more tests. Tests that can help to diagnose bowel cancer include:

▶ **Rectal exam:**

During a rectal exam, your doctor puts a gloved finger into your back passage to feel for any lumps or swelling.

▶ **Stool sample:**

Your doctor may ask for a sample of your stools (poo) to check for any hidden blood.

▶ **Colonoscopy:**

The doctor passes a thin tube with a light and camera into your bowel through your back passage. They can look for any abnormal areas or swellings, and they may also take photos and samples of your bowel.

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

- ▶ **Have a healthy diet:** Limit the amount of red meat and processed meat that you eat. Processed meat includes bacon, sausages, ham and salami. Eat more fibre, including at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables every day. Examples of portions are, 1 apple, 2 broccoli spears, or 7 strawberries.
- ▶ **Be a healthy weight:** Being a healthy weight is one of the best ways to protect yourself from cancer.
- ▶ **Be active:** Try to do at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on 5 or more days a week.
- ▶ **Cut out or limit alcohol:** Drinking alcohol increases your risk of bowel cancer. The more you cut down on alcohol, the more you can reduce your risk.
- ▶ **Don't smoke:** Smoking increases your risk of bowel cancer, and the more you smoke the greater the risk. Smokers are also more likely to develop polyps (small growths) in their bowel than non-smokers.
- ▶ **Get screened:** Screening can spot early signs of bowel cancer. It is especially important to get screened if you have a family history of bowel cancer or other risk factors.

## Bowel cancer screening

Testing for bowel cancer when you have no symptoms is called screening. BowelScreen is the national bowel screening programme. Once you register, BowelScreen delivers a free home test kit to people aged 59 to 69 every two years. You send back a sample of your poo. The sample is tested for traces of blood. If there is blood in the sample it doesn't mean that you have cancer, but you may be advised to have more tests.

For more information see [www.bowelscreen.ie](http://www.bowelscreen.ie)

If you are diagnosed with bowel cancer, read our booklet *Understanding bowel (colorectal) and anal cancer* for more information.



## Contact us for more information or support

If you are worried or have questions about bowel cancer or any cancer:



**Call our Support Line on Freephone  
1800 200 700.**



**Email [supportline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:supportline@irishcancer.ie)**

We will provide you with confidential advice, support and information.



**Ask about a call in your language.**

Visit our **Daffodil Centres** where our nurses can give you advice about how to spot cancer early and how to help prevent it. To find out where your local Daffodil Centre is, email **[daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie](mailto:daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie)**

Visit our website **[www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)** for more information on bowel cancer and ways you can reduce your risk of cancer.

