

What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is also known as colorectal cancer. Bowel cancer occurs when abnormal cells in the wall of the large bowel grow in an uncontrolled way.

The large bowel is part of the body's digestive system. It includes the colon, rectum and anal canal.²

What are the different types of bowel cancer?

Most bowel cancers are thought to develop from non-malignant growths on the lining of the wall of the bowel. These non-malignant growths are called adenomas or polyps.¹

The most common type of bowel cancer is called an adenocarcinoma, named after the gland cells in the lining of the bowel in which the cancer first develops. Other rare types include squamous cell cancers (which start in the skin like cells of the bowel lining), carcinoid tumours, sarcomas and lymphomas.

What are the symptoms of bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is usually a slow-growing cancer. There are often no symptoms in the early stages of the disease.

The most common symptoms of bowel cancer are:

- ▶ bleeding from the rectum (this may be noticed as blood in the stools)¹
- ▶ symptoms of anaemia¹
- ▶ a change in bowel habit (loose stools or constipation)¹
- ▶ abdominal pain or cramping¹
- ▶ bloating¹
- ▶ weight loss¹
- ▶ unexplained tiredness or fatigue.¹

There are a number of conditions that may cause these symptoms, not just bowel cancer. If any of these symptoms are experienced, it is important that they are discussed with a doctor.

What are the risk factors for bowel cancer?

A risk factor is any factor that is associated with an increased chance of developing a particular health condition, such as bowel cancer. There are different types of risk factors, some of which can be modified and some which cannot.

It should be noted that having one or more risk factors does not mean a person will develop bowel cancer. Many people have at least one risk factor but will never develop bowel cancer, while others with bowel cancer may have had no known risk factors. Even if a person with bowel cancer has a risk factor, it is usually hard to know how much that risk factor contributed to the development of their disease.

While the causes of bowel cancer are not fully understood, there are a number of factors associated with the risk of developing the disease. These factors include:

- ▶ increasing age¹
- ▶ a personal history of bowel cancer or polyps¹
- ▶ a family history of bowel cancer, adenoma or gynaecological cancer¹
- ▶ a personal history of inflammatory bowel disease.¹



How is bowel cancer diagnosed?

Bowel cancer may be diagnosed after a person visits their doctor with symptoms, or if a screening test shows signs that suggest bowel cancer may be present. For more information about bowel cancer screening in Australia, visit www.cancerscreening.gov.au/internet/screening/publishing.nsf/Content/bowel-about.

A number of tests may be performed to investigate symptoms of bowel cancer and confirm a diagnosis. Some of the more common tests include:¹

- ▶ a physical examination¹
- ▶ a blood test to check for anaemia¹
- ▶ an internal examination of the rectum, anus and colon – this may include a sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy
- ▶ imaging of the bowel, which may include barium enema, computed tomography (CT) scan or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)
- ▶ taking a sample of tissue (biopsy) from the bowel wall for examination under a microscope.¹

Treatment options

Treatment and care of people with cancer is usually provided by a team of health professionals – called a multidisciplinary team. Treatment for bowel cancer depends on the stage of the disease, the severity of symptoms and the person's general health. Treatment usually involves surgery, and may also include chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy to destroy cancer cells.^{1,3} Research is ongoing to find new ways to diagnose and treat different types of cancer. Some people may be offered the option of participation in a clinical trial to test new ways of treating bowel cancer.

Finding support

People often feel overwhelmed, scared, anxious and upset after a diagnosis of cancer. These are all normal feelings.

Having practical and emotional support during and after diagnosis and treatment for cancer is very important. Support may be available from family and friends, health professionals or special support services.

In addition, State and Territory Cancer Councils provide general information about cancer as well as information on local resources and relevant support groups. The Cancer Council Helpline can be accessed from anywhere in Australia by calling **13 11 20** for the cost of a local call.

More information about finding support can be found on the Cancer Australia website www.canceraustralia.gov.au or Bowel Cancer Australia <http://www.bowelcanceraustralia.org>

References

1. Australian Cancer Network Colorectal Cancer Guidelines Revision Committee. Guidelines for the Prevention, Early Detection and Management of Colorectal Cancer. The Cancer Council Australia and Australian Cancer Network, Sydney 2005.
2. National Cancer Institute. Colon cancer treatment (PDQ) – patient version. Available from <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/treatment/colon/Patient>. [Accessed July 2012].
3. Pezzaro C, Jefford M. Early stage bowel cancer – follow up and survivorship. Australian Family Physician 2009; 38(4): 205–208.

