

Reducing Your Risk

Many of the factors that can cause bowel cancer (also known as colorectal cancer), such as age, genetic makeup and previous bowel conditions, are not things you can control. However, there are things you can do to help reduce your risk.

This factsheet has been developed to help you understand some of the factors currently believed to influence the development of bowel cancer and to provide ideas on how to reduce your personal risk. If you would like further information or have any concerns, please call our **Bowel Cancer Advisory Service on freephone 0800 8 40 35 40**.

Get to know your bowel habit

Once you know what is normal for you it will be easier to recognise any changes. Look in the toilet bowl and check your bowel motions. How often do you go to the toilet and what do your stools look like? They should be mid to dark brown in colour; solid, smooth and easy to pass.

Increase your fibre intake

Fibre from wholemeal foods, fruit, vegetables and pulses help to add bulk to your motions, making the passage of waste through the digestive system more efficient. Increasing the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables in your daily diet should help to empty your bowel frequently and easily. At least five portions of fruit and vegetables per day, in a good variety of colours and types, are recommended.

Eating more vegetables does seem to help lower the risk of bowel cancer whether you eat meat or not. The evidence that fruit may be protective seems to be less conclusive. Research suggests that the antioxidant vitamins and minerals contained in fruit and vegetables help prevent cell damage. There is also evidence that a diet rich in folate is linked to a lower risk of bowel cancer. Folate is a B vitamin found in green leafy vegetables. (Folic acid, the synthetic form of folate found in supplements, is not thought to be protective).

You need fibre to help waste products travel through the bowel. People who do not eat enough fibre tend to be constipated. The longer waste remains in contact with the bowel lining, the more likely damage can be done and the risk of bowel cancer is increased. Some types of fibre also help to remove potentially cancer-causing bile acids.

Reduce the amount of red meat in your diet and include fish

Processed or barbecued red meats contain potential cancer-causing chemicals. Red meat is also difficult for the digestive system to break down and so remains in the bowel for longer. Try replacing it with poultry, fish or pulses.

Some studies suggest that a diet rich in fish, particularly oily fish such as salmon, mackerel and sardines, can reduce the risk of bowel cancer.

Lower your fat intake

Diets high in saturated fats contribute to the risk by encouraging the body to store excess weight. Cut down on fried food and trim excess fat from meat and poultry. It is also recommended you reduce the amount of 'hidden' trans-fats found in foods such as chocolate, biscuits, cakes, crisps, chips and processed food. Try replacing sugary treats with high fibre alternatives such as porridge with fresh fruit, or oatcakes.

Increase fluids and avoid constipation

You should ideally be drinking between 10-12 glasses of fluids, especially water, each day. If you are straining to go to the toilet or are passing hard, dry stools (poo), you are probably constipated. Constipation is caused by lack of fibre and fluids in the diet slowing down the passage of waste through your digestive system. Keep your stools soft and moving regularly by introducing plenty of natural fibre by eating the recommended daily amount of fresh fruit and vegetables and increasing your fluid intake. Caffeine-based drinks such as tea, coffee, cola should be reduced because they can cause dehydration.

Reduce your alcohol consumption

Drinking alcohol to excess is known to increase your risk of being diagnosed with bowel cancer. Don't drink more than the recommended maximum alcohol limit: 21 units a week for men (approximately 7 pints of lager) and 14 units for women (approximately 7 small glasses of wine).

Stop smoking

Smoking increases your risk of many cancers including bowel cancer. If you want to stop or have tried but are finding it difficult, ask your local GP or Practice Nurse for details of support services.

Take exercise

Bowel movements are kept regular with exercise. About 30 minutes of moderate daily exercise such as brisk walking, stretching, tai chi, dancing, swimming and gardening will help waste move through your system.

Watch your weight

Overweight and obese people have an increased risk of bowel cancer. You can maintain a healthy body weight by balancing what you eat with physical activity. Talk to your GP or Practice Nurse about your ideal weight and the best way forward if you need to lose weight.

Be aware of your family history

People who have a known family history of bowel cancer may have a higher risk and be eligible for genetic screening. If you are concerned that you may have a family history, speak to your GP or talk to one of our advisory nurses on 0800 8 40 35 40.

Accept any invitation for bowel cancer screening

Bowel cancer screening programmes have been set up in England, Scotland and Wales. A project has been set up to plan and implement Bowel Screening in Northern Ireland which will start at the end of December 2009.

Bowel cancer screening aims to detect bowel cancer at an early stage when treatment is most effective. Participating in regular bowel cancer screening has been shown to reduce the risk of dying from bowel cancer by 16%. It is therefore important you accept any invitation to participate in the screening programme.

You may find the following additional factsheets helpful:

- Diet, nutrition and bowel cancer
- Understanding bowel cancer
- Knowing the symptoms and who is at risk
- Bowel cancer screening

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For further information contact the Bowel Cancer Advisory Service on: (Freephone) 0800 8 40 35 40

Email: advisory@bowelcanceruk.org.uk

Website: www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk

Registered Charity Number: 1071038

London office

7 Rickett Street

London SW6 1RU

Tel: 020 7381 9711

Fax: 020 7381 5752

Edinburgh Office

20 Queen Street

Edinburgh EH2 1JX

Tel: 0131 225 5333

Fax: 0131 225 2206