

Family History

This factsheet gives you information about bowel cancer and how family history can affect your chances of developing the disease. You may be at higher risk than the general population if a close relative has had bowel cancer. Understanding this risk can be complicated, but we hope the information below will help answer your questions. It's important to note that if only one of your close relatives has been diagnosed with bowel cancer, over the age of 50, then you are at no higher risk than the general population.

What are your risks?

You may be at greater risk of bowel cancer if:

A suspected or known genetic condition in your family may mean that you carry the gene that puts you in a high risk category of bowel cancer. These genetic conditions include Lynch syndrome (also known as HNPCC) and familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP). If a member of your family has one of these conditions then genetic testing and regular investigation is a high priority.

You have one close relative with the disease who was under 50 at diagnosis, or two close relatives who were aged 60 or over at diagnosis.

Two or more of your relatives have been diagnosed with the disease when under 60 years old, one being a close relative to you and the two of them being close relatives of one another. Or two close relatives have been diagnosed at an average age of under 60 one of whom is a close relative to you.

What is a close family relative?

This is your mother, your father, a brother/sister, or your child. Your doctor may use the term "first degree relative". This is significant as the closer the relationship the more likely there may be a genetic link.

What to do next

If you think you have a significant family history, then discuss this with your doctor. Be clear on who has the disease and how old they were when diagnosed. If there are other cancers in your family, then mention those too as this might increase the risk.

If your doctor agrees that you have a possible increased risk of bowel cancer, you will be referred for a colonoscopy and possibly to a genetic/family history clinic.

Please see our related Factsheet **How Bowel Cancer is Diagnosed** for more information.

What happens at the genetic/family history clinic?

The doctors there will want to get as clear and detailed family history from you as possible, so gather as much information as you can before you go. This information should include how each affected person is related to you, their ages and what types of cancer they had diagnosed.

You may be offered genetic testing for HNPCC and/or FAP. This can usually only be done if one of your relatives, with bowel cancer, agrees to be tested with you, as the clinic will be looking for specific genes. Counselling will help you understand your risk and help you make the decision about having genetic testing.

What happens if the genetic test is positive?

Should a genetic link be found, regular screening may be carried out to check for the development of bowel cancer. Should any polyps start showing up, they can then be removed. (See our factsheet **Understanding Bowel Cancer**).

People at risk of HNPCC usually have to have a colonoscopy every 18-24 months. Some people who are over 50 years old may also have to have a gastroscopy every two years. This is done by using a thin, flexible fibre-optic instrument that is passed through the mouth and allows the doctor to see whether there is any damage to the lining of the oesophagus (gullet) or stomach.

People at risk of FAP will usually have a colonoscopy every year. This may be alternated with a flexible sigmoidoscopy every other year.

Source

The information in this factsheet is based on the current UK guidelines produced by the British Society of Gastroenterology for screening people with a family history of bowel cancer and known genetic disorders.

Further sources of information

We have a range of related Factsheets that you can download from our website here:

<http://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk/home/bowel-cancer/downloads/factsheets>

There is further information and explanation of the genetic conditions at:
NHS Choices **www.nhs.uk**

To find out more about this product, or to tell us what you think, please call us on 020 7386 4007 or email **feedback@bowelcanceruk.org.uk**

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