

5 June 2025

Health Spotlight: Bowel Cancer

Key statistics

- Bowel cancer is the fourth most diagnosed cancer in Australia with an estimated 15,542 new cases in 2024.¹
- In Australia, it is estimated males have a 1 in 19 risk of being diagnosed with bowel cancer by age 85 (and a 1 in 23 risk for females).²
- Bowel cancer was the second most common cancer (behind lung cancer) to cause death in Australia in 2024, leading to approximately 5,239 deaths.³

What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer, also known as **colorectal cancer**, is a broad term referring to cancer that can develop in any part of the large intestine, including the colon and rectum. **Colon cancer** develops in the colon, which is the longest part of the large intestine. **Rectal cancer** develops in the rectum, the last section of the large intestine.

The stages of bowel cancer are:

Stage 0	Abnormal, non-cancerous cells exist in the innermost bowel lining layers (but may become cancerous)
Stage I	Cancerous cells have spread deeper into the bowel wall
Stage II	Cancer has spread through the bowel wall muscle and may have reached nearby organs or lymph nodes
Stage III	Cancer has spread to nearby organs and lymph nodes
Stage IV	Cancer has spread to other body parts (eg. lungs or brain)

Symptoms

Bowel cancer is slow growing, often with no symptoms in the early stages.⁴ Symptoms to look out for include:

- ✓ Blood in stools
- ✓ Changes in bowel habits (such as more frequent constipation or diarrhea)
- ✓ A feeling that the bowel has not emptied all the way during a bowel movement
- ✓ Pain, cramping or bloating in the abdomen
- ✓ Anaemia (low red blood cells or low haemoglobin levels)
- ✓ Vomiting
- ✓ Unexplained weight loss
- ✓ A lump in the abdomen
- ✓ Fatigue.

These symptoms can often be confused with other conditions, so it is important to raise concern with a doctor if any lasting symptoms occur.

Detection

A range of tests help diagnose bowel cancer:



Physical Exam:

Checking for swelling or lumps in the abdomen and rectum



Flexible Sigmoidoscopy:

Looks at the rectum and lower colon



Blood Test:

Checks for signs of blood loss and low red blood levels blood



Scans (MRI, CT, PET):

Provide detailed images to check for signs of cancer



Colonoscopy:

A camera checks the colon for unusual tissue.



Faecal Occult Blood Test (iFOBT):

A home stool test that looks for hidden blood, which may indicate polyps or cancer.

The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program

The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program aims to reduce bowel cancer illness and deaths in Australia by using iFOBT to identify trace amounts of blood in stool samples before the cancer develops or noticeable symptoms emerge.¹⁰

Every two years, Australians aged 45 to 74 are eligible to do a free, at-home test. To learn more about this program, visit the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program website.

Causes and Risk Factors

Bowel cancer can develop due to a combination of genetic, medical, and lifestyle factors. Some of the key influences include:

Medical and Genetic Factors

- **Age:** The risk increases after 50.
- **Family history:** Having a close relative with bowel cancer raises the likelihood.
- **Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD):** Conditions like Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis.
- **Adenomatous polyps:** Certain polyps in the bowel may become cancerous over time.
- **Genetic mutations:** Inherited changes in certain genes can increase risk.
- **Type 2 diabetes:** Linked to a higher chance of developing bowel cancer.

Lifestyle Factors

- **Diet:** A low-fibre diet and high consumption of processed or red meat can contribute to bowel cancer risk.
- **Obesity and inactivity:** Being overweight or leading a sedentary lifestyle can increase likelihood.
- **Smoking and alcohol:** Both habits have been linked to bowel cancer development.⁵

Bowel cancer usually starts when cells in the lining of the large bowel grow in an abnormal and uncontrolled way to form polyps (a projecting growth of tissue).⁶ While most polyps are benign, some can develop into invasive cancers if left undetected and untreated, depending on the type, size and number of polyps, and whether the polyp contains abnormal cells.⁷

More than 90% of bowel cancer cases can be successfully treated if detected early.⁸ However, if left untreated, cancer cells can spread along the wall of the bowel (causing a blockage in some instances), to lymph nodes and to other parts of the body.⁹

Treatment

Treatment may vary based on the location and stage of the cancer, severity of the symptoms, and the health and wishes of the patient.¹¹

Surgery: While polyps and in situ cancers can often be removed during a diagnostic colonoscopy, surgery may be needed to remove the cancer and surrounding healthy tissue and rejoin the two ends of the bowel. If the bowel cannot be reconnected, a stoma will be made (an opening to the outside of the body, allowing waste to leave the body via a colostomy bag external of the body).

Targeted therapy: Medicines have been developed to specifically attack cancer cells with no harm to normal, healthy cells.

Immunotherapy: Immunotherapy uses medicines that boost the ability of the immune system to attack cancer cells. It is helpful treating advanced bowel cancers, including cancers that have spread, come back after treatment or which cannot be removed by surgery.

Chemotherapy: Chemotherapy is used either before surgery to reduce the size of the cancer, or after surgery to reduce the risk of bowel cancer returning. It can be done using oral tablets or intravenous injections.

Radiation therapy: Radiation therapy (or radiotherapy) kills cancer cells or prevents further growth with high-energy x-rays or other types of radiation.¹²

Prevention

There are many ways to reduce the risk of developing bowel cancer¹³, including:

- ✔ Eating a healthy, fiber-rich diet (including fresh fruit and vegetables)
- ✔ Limiting consumption of red meat and processed meats
- ✔ Not smoking
- ✔ Staying physically active
- ✔ Limiting alcohol consumption
- ✔ Maintaining a healthy body weight.

Resources

Bowel Cancer Australia

Provides support, information and resources for people on a bowel cancer journey and their loved ones, including a peer-to-peer network and a specialist telehealth helpline.

1800 727 336 | bowelcanceraustralia.org/

GI Cancer Institute

Resources for all types of gastro-intestinal cancers, finding support groups and updates on the latest research and trials.

1300 666 769 | gicancer.org.au/

References

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- 4 [What are the symptoms of bowel cancer?](#) Cancer Australia, 18 September 2024
- 5 [Bowel cancer \(colon and rectal cancer\)](#). HealthDirect, November 2023
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- 7 [Types of bowel cancer](#). Cancer Australia, 18 September 2024
- 8 [Screening](#). Cancer Australia, 4 February 2025
- 9 [Bowel cancer \(colon and rectal cancer\)](#). HealthDirect, November 2023
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- 11 [Treatment options](#). Cancer Australia, 20 November 2024
- 12 [Radiation therapy](#). Bowel Cancer Australia
- 13 [Bowel Cancer](#). Cancer Council, 13 February 2025