



Australian Government

NATIONAL BOWELCANCER

SCREENING PROGRAM

FACT SHEET

BOWEL CANCER

- Australia has one of the highest rates of bowel cancer in the world.
- Each year around 17,000 Australians are diagnosed with bowel cancer and over 90% of these people are aged over 50.
- Around 100 Australians die each week from bowel cancer making it the second most common cause of cancer-related death after lung cancer.
- The good news is that if found early 9 out of 10 cases of bowel cancer can be successfully treated.



THE PROGRAM AND SCREENING

- The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (the Program) is a population based screening program that aims to help detect bowel cancer early and reduce the number of Australians who die each year from the disease.
- Screening involves testing people who do not have any obvious symptoms. The aim is to find polyps or bowel cancer early when they are easier to treat and cure. Polyps are tiny growths on the bowel lining that may become cancerous.
- The screening test used in the Program is an immunochemical Faecal Occult Blood Test (iFOBT) which involves taking a tiny sample of poo which is tested in a pathology laboratory. The iFOBT can detect tiny amounts of blood in poo which may be a sign of cancer or polyps.
- By 2020 people aged 50 to 74 years will be sent a free test kit in the mail every two years – around 4 million people each year.
- National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) approved guidelines support the Program and recommend iFOBT testing every 2 years from 50-74 years for those at average risk and without symptoms. Around 95-98% of the population are at near-average risk and should be screened via an iFOBT, rather than colonoscopy.¹

¹ Cancer Council Australia Colorectal Cancer Guidelines Working Party 2017. Clinical practice guidelines for the prevention, early detection and management of colorectal cancer. Sydney: Cancer Council Australia

PROGRAM RESULTS

- Of those screened through the Program who have had a colonoscopy following a positive result around 1 in 29 have had a confirmed or suspected cancers and 1 in 8 have had an adenoma detected (benign tumours which may become cancerous).²
- A 2018 study found that people who were invited to screen through the Program had 13% less risk of dying from bowel cancer, and were more likely to have less-advanced bowel cancers when diagnosed, than non-invitees.³
- At current participation (around 40%) the Program is expected to save 59,000 lives by 2040; if this rose to 60% 83,000 lives could be saved.⁴

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

- People aged 50-74 years are sent a free Home Test Kit (an iFOBT) by mail to complete at home and send back to a laboratory for analysis.
- Test results are sent directly to the participant and their nominated doctor. Participants with a positive test result are advised to see their doctor to discuss the result and referral to further diagnostic testing, usually colonoscopy.
- Follow-up health services after a positive test result are provided through state and territory government health services or private health services.
- A national Program register has been established for data collection, quality control and reporting.
- State and territory governments have a role in following-up participants with a positive test result to encourage them to see their doctor and have appropriate diagnostic tests.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Program Website: www.cancerscreening.gov.au/bowel

Program Information Line: 1800 118 868

Test Kit Helpline: 1800 930 998.

Translating & Interpreting Service - 13 14 50

The Cancer Council Helpline - 13 11 20

State and territory Cancer Councils provide a confidential service where you can talk about your concerns or questions about cancer with specially trained staff. The staff can send written information and provide contact details of services in the local area. The Helpline also supports general practice with information on diagnosis, treatment and care.

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. National Bowel Cancer Screening Program: monitoring report 2019. Cat. no. CAN 125. Canberra: AIHW

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018. Analysis of bowel cancer outcomes for the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program. Cat. no. CAN 113. Canberra: AIHW.

⁴ Lew JB et al, Long-term evaluation of benefits, harms, and cost-effectiveness of the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program in Australia: a modelling study. *Lancet Public Health* 2017; 2: e331–40