

Keeping a lid on bowel cancer

Ways to lower your risk



Bowel Cancer
NEW ZEALAND

bowelcancernz.org.nz



Our mission

To combat bowel cancer on every front

Bowel Cancer NZ is a nationwide, patient-focused charity dedicated to reducing the impact of bowel cancer in our communities through awareness, education, advocacy, research and support. Our goal is to lead the world with solutions to reduce New Zealand's bowel cancer statistics and free future generations from the impact of bowel cancer.

Our vision

That no New Zealander will die of bowel cancer

We may never eradicate bowel cancer, but through better screening, treatments and support, we can catch it earlier when it's most treatable. That's why we won't stop until we've beaten apathy, beaten embarrassment, beaten the lack of awareness and funding... and above all, beaten bowel cancer.



Introduction

Bowel cancer (rectal and colon) is preventable, and yet New Zealand has one of the highest rates of bowel cancer in the world.

It doesn't have to be this way. If caught early, bowel cancer is curable in 90% of cases.

Bowel cancer can be present for a long time before symptoms appear, and if it's detected early, it is easier to treat with a far better chance of survival.

Screening can detect early-stage bowel cancer, and that's why it's important to do your free test if you are eligible for the National Bowel Screening Programme.

There are steps you can take to lower your overall risk of developing bowel cancer, and we'll outline some of these in this booklet. We'll also mention lifestyle, age and genetic factors that may contribute to the development of this type of cancer.

We hope this information will help inform the decisions and choices you can make about your own health and wellness and that of your whānau.

Keeping a lid on bowel cancer: the facts

Bowel cancer (also known as colorectal or colon cancer) is a cancer of the lining of the colon or rectum, and over 3,000 New Zealanders are diagnosed every year.

- Bowel cancer is curable in around 90% of cases if caught early.
- Bowel cancer is the second-highest cause of cancer death in New Zealand, second only to lung cancer.
- Approximately 1,200 people die from this cancer each year in Aotearoa.
- Māori and Pacific patients are more likely to have a first diagnosis at an emergency department, presenting with bowel cancer at an advanced stage.
- Bowel cancer is more common for those over 50 years old, but it can affect people of all ages. More than 350 Kiwis under 50 are diagnosed each year.
- Men have a higher risk of bowel cancer than women.

Keeping a lid on bowel cancer. Ways to lower your risk





Bowel cancer symptoms

Knowing the symptoms of bowel cancer is the first step you can take towards early detection.

Symptoms may come and go, so don't wait if you have any of those listed below or are concerned about your bowel health. Knowing your bowel habits will help you recognise any changes. No matter your age, see your doctor straight away because early detection offers the best chance of a cure.

Symptoms may include:

- bleeding from the bottom (rectal bleeding),
- change of bowel motions/habits that come and go over several weeks,
- anaemia (iron deficiency),
- severe persistent or periodic abdominal pain,
- a lump or mass in the abdomen,
- tiredness and loss of weight for no obvious reason.

Risk factors

Certain lifestyle, age and genetic factors have been linked to bowel cancer. Knowing what these are can help you make decisions that may lower your overall risk of developing the disease.

While age and genetics are two risk factors you cannot control, you can make some lifestyle changes, such as eating a healthier diet and exercising regularly.

Let's look at those factors that may heighten your risk of developing bowel cancer. Having one or more risk factors **doesn't necessarily mean you will develop bowel cancer**.

- Increasing age. The majority of people diagnosed are aged 50+.
- A diet high in red meat and/or processed meats and animal fats.
- A low fibre, high-fat diet.
- Lack of exercise.
- Obesity or being overweight.
- Smoking and alcohol.
- Genetic factor: up to 20% of those diagnosed have a relative with the disease. Find out if there is a family history of bowel cancer and/or polyps and the age of the relative(s) when diagnosed.
- Bowel cancer can be associated with genetic conditions such as Lynch Syndrome.
- Inflammatory bowel disease (includes Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis).
- Diabetes.

Bowel screening

Screening is a diagnostic tool used to identify abnormalities or irregularities. These may warrant further investigation with a procedure like a colonoscopy (to identify and remove pre-cancerous polyps or detect bowel cancer).

The government-run National Bowel Screening Programme (NBSP) is **free** for eligible men and women aged 60-74 every two years.

To address a health inequity, Māori and Pasifika will be invited to participate in bowel screening from 50 years old, which will be rolled out nationally from July 2023. Find more information on their website timetoscreen.nz/bowel-screening



It's always a good idea to discuss any bowel health concerns with your doctor and seek their advice on whether or not screening will benefit you. They will review your current and previous history and advise the best way to manage any concerns you may have.

Our website has more information about screening and how to purchase a BowelScreen Aotearoa test (please note: these kits are for those *ineligible* for the NBSP).

bowelcancernz.org.nz > About bowel cancer > Early detection and prevention > Screening



So what can I do to lower my risk?

While no cancer is completely preventable, you can lower your risk of bowel cancer by making some lifestyle changes, such as eating a healthy diet and exercising regularly.

The internet is overflowing with information on how to stay healthy in both body and mind. Take time to research diet and exercise choices and any complementary therapies that interest you. Read about the health benefits and decide whether these are habits and practices you can access and integrate into your life.

Always seek medical advice if you need to.

A healthy diet and regular exercise can lower your risk of bowel cancer

Eating a range of nutritious foods is a good way to go for any reason but healthy eating takes on a whole new meaning when it comes to preventing bowel cancer. Research¹ has shown that consuming a wide variety of foods can improve and maintain good digestion and bowel health. Making changes can be hard at first but stay with it. You'll see and feel the benefits.

¹ World Cancer Research Fund: <https://www.wcrf.org/dietandcancer/colorectal-cancer/>

Enjoy nutritious foods regularly such as:

- vegetables, legumes (dried beans, peas, lentils), nuts and seeds, fruits,
- grains, cereals, breads, rice, pasta and noodles: preferably choose wholegrain, fibre -rich options,
- fish, seafood, poultry, lean meat, eggs, and plant based proteins such as tofu,
- reduced-fat milks, yoghurt, and cheese. Preferably choose lower sugar varieties of yoghurt.

Limit your intake of the following:

- Saturated fats from animal foods, and also found in coconut and palm oil.
- If you are overweight, limiting total fat intake can help you achieve a healthier weight. Be mindful of 'fat free' foods, which are often higher in added sugar and salt to enhance taste.
- Red meat (beef, lamb, pork). Aim for around 350 – 500g cooked weight per week of red meats.
- Processed meats, like ham and bacon, as they are classified as carcinogenic (cancer causing) to humans. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) there are no safe limits for processed meats.
- Foods and drinks high in salt, and limit adding salt to food.
- Foods and drinks high in added sugars. Keep an eye out for the hidden sugars as they may be under a different name.
- Alcohol. If you do drink, limit to one standard drink per day for women and two for men with two alcohol-free days a week. Even one standard drink a day may increase your cancer risk.
- Quit tobacco and all forms of smoking. Please see your GP or contact Quitline at quit.org.nz for support.

Stay well hydrated

Water is best. Drink to your thirst and check your pee is a pale 'straw' colour.

Exercise: there are many health benefits to moving your butt

Strong evidence suggests that regular exercise of any type for at least 30 minutes a day, five or more days a week, may help reduce the risk of bowel cancer.

A sedentary lifestyle and obesity (especially in men) can significantly increase the chances of developing bowel cancer. Irrespective of height or build, a growing waistline (abdominal fat) may also increase the risk of other illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes.

Exercise can make you feel good both mentally and physically and may even reduce depression. Even a small amount of exercise can bring real benefits by increasing energy levels, improving sleep, and helping to prevent various chronic diseases.

How much exercise is enough?

Begin with small, achievable steps. As you become used to the changes, add more until you can reach your 30 minute (or more) goal of moderate-intensity physical activity. Aim to do this every day if you can. Brisk walking is good, done at a pace where you can talk but not sing.

Time is always in short supply these days. You may not be able to do the 30 minutes all at once, so accumulate the time of moderate-intensity exercise by combining some shorter sessions of 10 or 15 minutes during the day.

Sleep

Getting a good night's sleep can seem more elusive than ever these days, but it offers one of the best ways for our bodies to rest, heal and stay healthy. When we can't get to sleep, stay asleep, or have breathing issues such as snoring or sleep apnoea, we cannot be at our best. Our health can be affected if these problems are continual or long-term.

The average adult needs between 7-9 hours of sleep a night. So how can you improve your sleep? Here are a few simple things to try.

- Have a regular bedtime and routine.
- Block the blue light from media devices such as phones, tablets, eBooks, and laptops.
- Keep your bedroom cool and dark. Get rid of as much light from any source as possible.
- Cut out caffeine from tea, coffee or other sources at least 6 hours prior to bed.
- Reading a book or journaling can help settle the brain before sleep.
- Herbal relaxing teas, hot milk drinks, and aromatherapy oils can relax the mind and body.

Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies have seen a huge growth in popularity in recent years. Many of these focus on relaxation and stress reduction, helping to calm emotions, relieve anxiety, improve mobility and enhance health and wellbeing. Health professionals are interested in the idea that positive emotions can improve your health.

Modalities such as yoga, reiki, acupuncture and tai chi, and products like dietary supplements and herbal remedies are termed 'complementary' because they are often used together with conventional medicine to provide a more holistic approach to care. If you're undergoing medical treatment, or living with a chronic illness or condition, talk to your medical professional to see if some complementary therapies may be right for you.

Mindfulness

How often do you live in the present? If you're like most of us, you're already thinking about tomorrow or next week!

Mindfulness is a type of meditation that focuses on the moment: what you are sensing, feeling, and thinking, without interpretation or judgement. Combined with deep breathing methods, mindfulness can relax the body and mind and reduce stress.

Mindfulness can be practised for a minute or longer if you like. Allow your thoughts and feelings to just 'be'. Taking micro-breaks during the day can give your brain a calm oasis to rest and recover. A couple of apps you could try are Headspace, Calm and Smiling Mind. You'll be surprised at how good you'll feel.



Breathing

It sounds simple, we do it all the time, but deep, focused breathing can be a great way to relax and lower stress levels. Try breathing from your diaphragm (below your lungs) rather than from the top of your chest. Take a breath in for four counts, hold for four and breathe out for eight. Repeat for 5-10 rounds. A Google search can show other breathing techniques that may work well for you too.

Being grateful

All too often we think about the things we don't have rather than the things we do. Developing an attitude of gratefulness has proven benefits for our brains and immune systems. Look up the '5 Minute Journal' online or as an app for your phone. It prompts you to jot down three things you are grateful for each day.

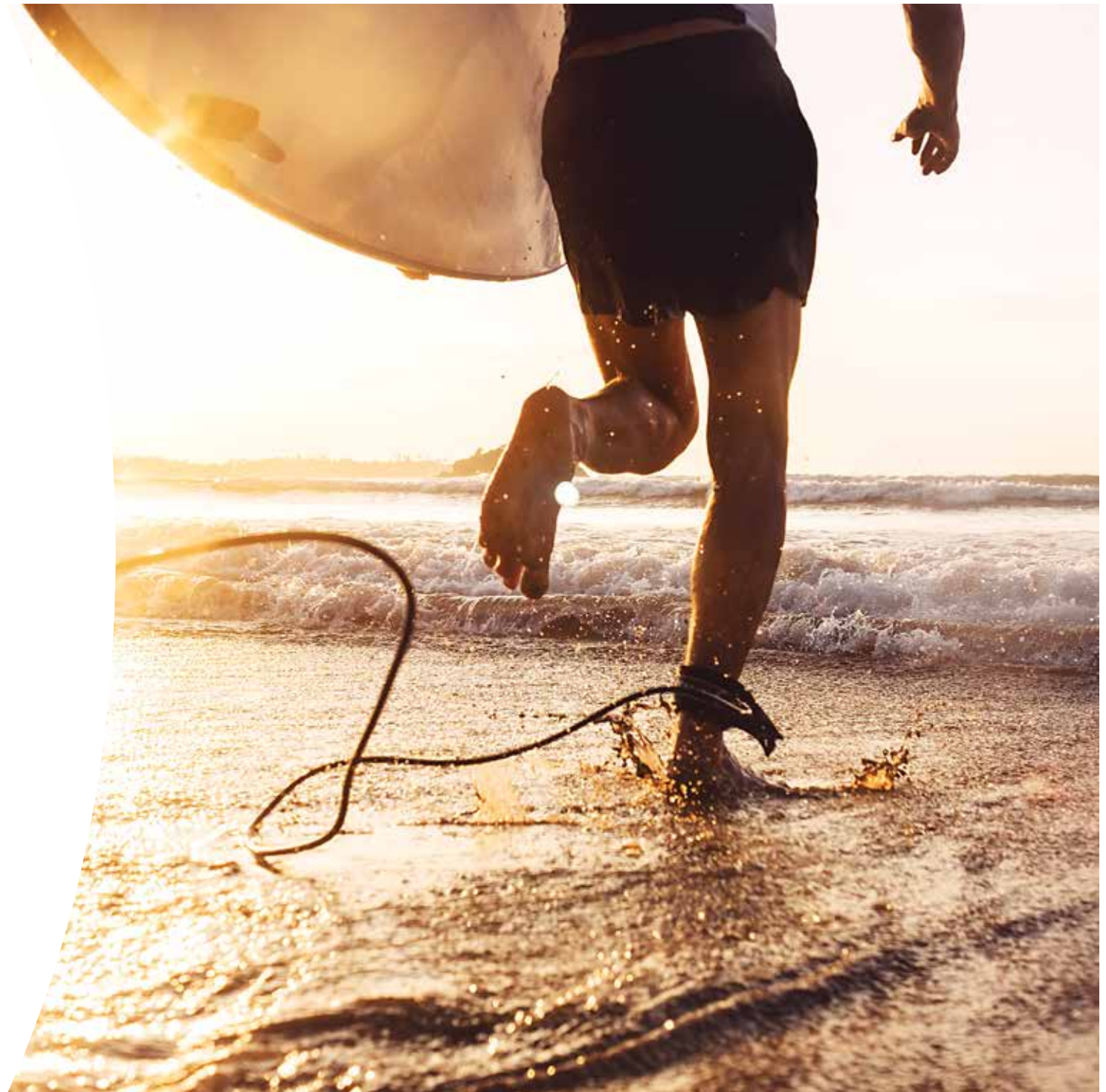
Conclusion

While no cancer is entirely preventable, we do know that 90% of bowel cancer cases are curable if caught early. Bowel cancer risk factors like age and genetics cannot be changed, but others can, and these risk factors are linked to what we eat, drink and how we live. So making changes to your diet and lifestyle can significantly lower your risk of developing bowel cancer.

Changing life-long habits can be challenging, and getting guidance from your doctor or other health professionals may be helpful. They can suggest ways to make changes in a measured and realistic way that is achievable for you.

It's worth the effort not only to lower your risk of bowel cancer but also other serious illnesses like heart disease and diabetes.

Bowel Cancer NZ is here to help too. If you have questions about bowel cancer, contact us on 0800 BCNZ NURSE (226 968) by email here4you@bowelcancernz.org.nz or via the website chatbot [bowelcancernz.org.nz](https://www.bowelcancernz.org.nz)





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Bowel Cancer on our community*

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