

Key Facts - Bowel Cancer

How common is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is one of the most common cancers among New Zealand men. Around 1,300 men are diagnosed each year. Most bowel cancer occurs in people over 50.

What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer (colon, rectum, or colorectal cancer) usually begins as a benign (not cancerous) polyp - a mushroom-like growth which occurs inside the bowel.

Symptoms of bowel cancer

- a change in bowel habits
- diarrhoea
- constipation or feeling that your bowel doesn't empty completely
- blood in your bowel motion
- bowel motions that are narrower than usual
- general abdominal discomfort (frequent gas pains, bloating or cramps)
- unexplained weight loss
- tiredness

These symptoms are often caused by other conditions but they need to be checked by your doctor.

How is bowel cancer diagnosed?

- rectal examination
- abdominal examination
- blood count
- a test for blood in the bowel motions
- Sigmoidoscopy
- Colonoscopy

Treatments

Most people will have surgery. Some will be offered a combination of two or more treatments, such as surgery, chemotherapy and/or radiation therapy. Treatment depends upon the size of the cancer, and its location. Some men will have chemotherapy and radiation therapy prior to surgery.

Reducing your risk of bowel cancer

Eating more fibre (fruit, vegetables and whole grains), eating less red meat and regular exercise to maintain a healthy weight may help lower the risk of bowel cancer.

The causes of bowel cancer are not fully known. A family history of bowel cancer, increasing age (risk increases with age) and a personal history of bowel disease, e.g. inflammatory bowel disease, are risk factors you are not able to change.

Should those at increased risk be checked?

Advice as to who should be checked, what tests they should have and how often has been developed by the New Zealand Guidelines Group. Their leaflet called, 'Bowel Cancer: Information for people at increased risk of bowel cancer' is available from your family doctor or the New Zealand Guidelines Group (www.nzgg.org.nz).

For more detailed information please contact 0800 CANCER (226 237) or visit the Cancer Society's website www.cancernz.org.nz

This Key Facts Sheet was written in July 2008 by the Cancer Society of New Zealand. Cancer Society. Key Facts Sheets are reviewed every two years with the help of cancer experts and public.