

Screening for bowel (colorectal) cancer



Bowel cancer:

- is the second most commonly diagnosed cancer in New Zealand
- is the second most common cause of cancer related death
- affects both men and women equally

Research has shown that some deaths from bowel cancer can be prevented by screening.

Screening is the process where well, healthy people are invited to undergo some kind of test that will identify those people who may have, or be at high risk of developing, a specific disease.

Screening for bowel cancer can be done using a number of different tests. Each type of test has both potential benefits and some possible harms. The most commonly used test is called the faecal occult blood test (FOBT). This test looks for blood in the faeces (bowel motions) which may indicate possible cancer, polyps (growths that may become cancerous) or other bowel problems. If the FOB test shows blood (is positive) the person will need to undergo a colonoscopy for further investigation. A colonoscopy is a procedure where a doctor or nurse looks at the inside of the bowel using a long, flexible tube with a video camera in it.

The Ministry of Health is currently running a bowel screening pilot programme to people aged 50 to 74 years living in Waitemata, Auckland. The pilot will help the government decide whether to offer a national programme. All people over the age of 50 should consider participating in bowel screening to help reduce their risk for developing bowel cancer.

People who may have a higher risk for developing bowel cancer are:

- Those with a family history of bowel cancer
- Those with some rare genetic conditions
- Those with some other bowel diseases

These people should talk to their general practitioner about what tests they may need.

For further information see:

Cancer Society bowel (Colorectal) cancer screening position statement:

http://www.cancernz.org.nz/assets/files/info/Screening/CSNZ_PS_ColorectalCancerScreeningOct2010.pdf

Information for people at increased risk of bowel cancer:

<http://www.nzgg.org.nz/download/files/BowelCancer.pdf>

Or contact the Cancer Information Helpline
0800 CANCER (226 237)