

MACMILLAN
CANCER SUPPORT

ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT BOWEL CANCER?



About this leaflet

People worry about cancer for many different reasons. Perhaps you have a family member or friend who has been diagnosed. Or maybe you have symptoms you think might be cancer.

Some people feel anxious about something they have watched on television, or have read in the newspapers or online.

This leaflet explains:

- what we know about the main causes of bowel cancer
- what you can do to reduce your risk of developing cancer.

We hope it gives you the information you need or helps you find more support.

In this leaflet, we have included quotes from people who have been worried about bowel cancer, which you may find helpful. These are from people who have chosen to share their story with us.

To share your experience, visit **[macmillan.org.uk/shareyourstory](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/shareyourstory)**

We have also listed some other useful organisations at the end of this leaflet (see pages 28 to 29).

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What causes cancer?

Your body is made up of tiny building blocks called cells. Inside every cell is a set of genes. These genes are the instructions your cells need to work properly. Sometimes the structure inside a gene is permanently changed, so the gene no longer gives the correct instructions. This change is called a **gene mutation**.

Eventually, gene mutations in a cell may mean the cell stops working normally. Cancer develops when cells like this can multiply in an abnormal way and grow out of control.

Some cells in your body develop gene mutations during your lifetime. This happens by chance as a cell divides or does its job in the body. But it can also be caused by your lifestyle or the environment around you.

It is also possible for a gene mutation to run through a family, passing from parent to child. This is called an **inherited mutation**. Some inherited mutations make a person more likely to develop certain types of cancer. We have more information about inherited genes and cancer risk on pages 23 to 25.

It takes a long time for mutations to build up and cause cancer. This is why cancer is more likely to affect older people. People of any age can get cancer, but it is most common in people over the age of 50.

Understanding your risk of cancer

Most of the time, we do not know exactly why a cancer develops in one person and not another. Often, we do not know exactly what caused that cancer to start.

We do know some of the things that cause the damage that makes cancer more likely to develop. These are called **risk factors**. We have more information about risk factors and ways to reduce your cancer risk on pages 5 to 22.

Having one or more risk factors does not mean you will definitely get cancer. Some factors only slightly increase your risk. Others are much more likely to cause cancer. Smoking is a good example. Not everyone who smokes will develop cancer. But smoking greatly increases your risk. About 9 out of 10 people who develop lung cancer (90%) are smokers.

Risk factors for bowel cancer

In the UK, around 41,300 people are diagnosed with bowel cancer each year. It is the third most common cancer for men and for women in this country.

Age

Getting older is the single biggest risk factor for bowel cancer. Most people who get bowel cancer (95%) are over the age of 50.

Medical conditions

Inflammatory bowel disease

Having ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease can increase the risk of developing bowel cancer.

If you have this type of condition, a doctor who specialises in bowel diseases (gastroenterologist) will assess your risk. They may offer you regular bowel screening with a colonoscopy (see page 21).

Bowel polyps

Bowel polyps are non-cancerous growths on the lining of the bowel. If you have had certain types of bowel polyps, your risk of bowel cancer is increased. You may be offered regular screening with a colonoscopy.

Diabetes

Having diabetes may increase your risk of bowel cancer.

Lifestyle factors

Diet

A diet high in red or processed meat and low in fruit and vegetables increases your risk of bowel cancer.

Processed meats are meats that have had preservatives added to them, or that have been preserved by salting, curing or smoking. They include sausages, ham and burgers.

Smoking

Smoking tobacco, especially over a number of years, increases the risk of developing bowel cancer.

Being overweight

Being overweight can increase the risk of developing bowel cancer, especially for men.

Lack of physical activity

People who are not physically active are more likely to develop bowel cancer.

Choose a healthy lifestyle

More than half of bowel cancers in the UK (over 50%) could be prevented by lifestyle changes.

You cannot reduce your risk of cancer completely. But there are some ways you can lower your risk of bowel cancer and other cancers, and improve your general health.

Eat a healthy diet

There is no single food that causes or prevents cancer. Eating a balanced diet is good for your overall health and helps reduce your risk of some cancers. It can also help you keep to a healthy weight.

For most people, a daily balanced diet includes:

- lots of fruit and vegetables
- starchy foods (carbohydrates), such as bread, rice, pasta, noodles, couscous and potatoes
- some protein-rich foods, such as meat, poultry, fish, nuts, eggs and pulses (beans and lentils)
- some milk and dairy foods, such as cheese, yoghurt and cream
- a small amount of food high in fat, salt and sugar.

Drinks should mainly be water, tea and coffee (without sugar), or sugar-free drinks.

Eating plenty of high-fibre foods helps reduce the risk of bowel cancer. High-fibre foods include:

- wholegrain bread
- brown rice
- oats
- beans
- peas
- lentils
- grains
- seeds
- fruit and vegetables.

Potatoes with their skins on are also a good source of fibre.

Try to limit how much red and processed meat you eat. These are linked to a higher risk of bowel and prostate cancer. Red meat is beef, pork, lamb and veal. Processed meats include sausages, bacon, salami, tinned meats, and packet meats like sandwich ham.

You can find more detailed information about diet and cancer risk on the World Cancer Research Fund website ([wcrf-uk.org](https://www.wcrf-uk.org)).

Be physically active

Many studies have found that regular physical activity can reduce the risk of cancer. You should try to do at least 30 minutes of activity every day. Your cancer risk is reduced further if you are active for more than 30 minutes a day and if you exercise harder (vigorous activity).

You do not have to go to the gym to be active. Some people enjoy regular walking, cycling or swimming instead. During your regular activity, you should feel you are breathing faster but are still able to talk. Your pulse should be slightly faster than normal. You can increase the amount of activity you do as you get used to exercising.

If you are not used to doing exercise, ask your GP for advice about getting started. You can find more information about keeping active on these websites:

- England – [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)
- Scotland – [nhsinform.scot](https://www.nhsinform.scot)
- Wales – [nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk](https://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk)
- Northern Ireland – [nidirect.gov.uk](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk)

Keep to a healthy weight

Being overweight increases the risk of many types of cancer, including cancers of the bowel, kidney, womb and gullet (oesophagus).

Women who are overweight and have been through the menopause also have a higher risk of breast cancer.

Keeping to a healthy body weight reduces your risk of cancer and other health problems, such as heart disease and diabetes.

Here are some tips to help you keep to a healthy weight:

- Eat a healthy diet with lots of fruit and vegetables, and less fat and less sugar.
- Only eat as much food as you need according to how active you are.
- Be more physically active.

If you are worried about your weight or need more information, talk to your GP or a dietitian.

Give up smoking

If you smoke, giving up is the single most important thing you can do for your health.

In the UK, more than 1 in 4 cancer deaths (over 25%) are caused by smoking. Smoking increases the risk of the following cancers:

- mouth cancer
- throat cancer
- lung cancer
- bladder cancer
- kidney cancer
- pancreatic cancer
- bowel cancer
- stomach cancer
- cervical cancer.

Chewing or sucking tobacco is not a safe alternative to smoking cigarettes. If you chew or suck tobacco, you have a higher risk of developing mouth and oral cancers.

Breathing in other people's smoke (passive smoking) also increases your risk of developing cancer. Keep your home smoke-free to protect your and your family's health.

The long-term effects of e-cigarettes are not yet fully known. They are thought to be around 95% safer than smoking tobacco cigarettes.

If you want to give up smoking, it is never too late to stop. Ask your GP for advice, or contact the stop-smoking service in your area:

Smokefree (England)

0300 123 1044 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm, Saturday and Sunday, 11am to 4pm).

nhs.uk/smokefree

Smokeline (Scotland)

0800 84 84 84 (Monday to Friday, 8am to 10pm, Saturday and Sunday, 9am to 5pm).

canstopsmoking.com

Stop Smoking Wales

0808 252 8937

Text 'HMQ' to 80818

helpmequit.wales

Want2stop (Northern Ireland)

Text 'QUIT' to 70004

want2stop.info

Limit how much alcohol you drink

Drinking alcohol increases your risk of mouth and throat cancers. It is also linked to the following cancers:

- oesophageal (gullet) cancer
- bowel cancer
- liver cancer
- breast cancer.

In general, the more you drink, the higher your risk. Your risk is even higher if you also smoke.



The current guidelines say that if you drink alcohol:

- do not regularly drink more than 14 units of alcohol in a week
- spread the amount you drink in a week over three or more days
- try to have several alcohol-free days every week.

Remember, the number of units you are drinking depends on the size and strength of your drink:

- Half a pint of lower-strength (3 to 4%) beer, lager or cider contains 1 unit.
- Half a pint of higher-strength (5%) beer, lager or cider contains 1½ units.
- A standard glass of wine (175ml), often called a small glass in pubs and bars, contains around 2 units.
- A large glass of wine (250ml) contains 3 units.
- A single measure (25ml) of 40% spirits contains 1 unit.

You can find more information about alcohol and drinking guidelines at drinkaware.co.uk

Protect yourself from viruses

Viral infections are very common and usually do not cause cancer to develop. A small number of viruses have been linked to a higher risk of certain types of cancer. These include:

- human papilloma viruses (HPV), which increase the risk of cervical cancer and are also linked to cancer of the head and neck, anus, vulva, vagina and penis
- hepatitis B and C, which are linked to liver cancer
- HIV, which can increase the risk of cancers including lymphoma and sarcoma.

Using condoms and dental dams during sex can help protect you from some viruses.

If you inject drugs, it is important to never share needles. This is because viruses can pass from person to person in the blood.

Vaccines can be used to protect against HPV infection. The NHS offers the HPV vaccine to:

- girls from the age of 12 or 13
- men who have sex with men.

From 2019, the HPV vaccine will also be offered to boys from the age of 12 or 13.

Other people may also have the HPV vaccine, because they may have an increased risk of cancer caused by HPV infection. Your GP, local sexual health clinic or HIV clinic can give you more information.



Be bowel aware

When it is found early, bowel cancer can usually be treated very successfully. More than 9 out of 10 people (90%) survive bowel cancer when it is diagnosed at an early stage.

It is important to be aware of changes that could be a sign of bowel cancer. See your GP if you have any of these symptoms:

- Bleeding from the back passage (rectum) or blood in your poo.
- Looser poo or diarrhoea that lasts for 3 weeks or more.
- A feeling that your bowel is not properly empty after going to the toilet.
- A pain or lump in the tummy or back passage.
- Loss of weight or appetite.
- Feeling more tired (fatigued) than usual for some time, with no obvious reason.

Bowel problems are very common, so these symptoms may not be caused by cancer. It is still important to get them checked out. Do not be embarrassed to speak to your doctor about your symptoms. Conversations like this are part of their everyday job.

If you continue to have symptoms, it is important to make another appointment with your GP. People under the age of 50 do not usually develop bowel cancer, but it is still possible. Whatever age you are, talk to your doctor again if you continue to have symptoms.



Take part in bowel screening

Screening aims to find changes in the bowel before cancer develops, or to find cancer at an early stage. If bowel cancer is found early, it can be treated more effectively.

If you are registered with a GP and live in:

- England, you are offered screening every 2 years from the age of 60 to 74 (in some areas, you are also offered an extra screening test when you are 55 – see opposite page)
- Scotland, you are offered screening every two years from the age of 50 to 74
- Wales or Northern Ireland, you are offered screening every 2 years from the age of 60 to 74.

If you are older than 74, you can still have bowel screening, but you may not be sent an invitation. Talk to your GP if you still want to take part.

'The test is something you think about but don't get around to doing. My brother had bowel cancer, so I was happy to do it.'

Paul

Home-testing kits

The first part of bowel screening is a test kit that is sent to you in the post. You use the kit to collect some poo and send it back in the envelope provided. Make sure you follow the instructions included with the kit carefully.

At the laboratory, your sample is checked for tiny amounts of blood. Sometimes blood can be a sign of cancer or early bowel changes that may develop into cancer.

Bowel scope screening

In some areas of England, an extra test called a bowel scope is offered when you are 55. Eventually, this test will be offered in all areas of England. Bowel scope screening does not replace the home-testing kit.

During this test, a doctor or nurse gently puts a flexible tube with a tiny light and camera into the back passage. They use this to look for any changes inside the nearest part of the large bowel (the rectum and the first part of the colon).

A bowel scope can find cancer or early changes that may develop into cancer.

Further tests

Most people have normal results from their home-testing kit or bowel scope screening. Some have an abnormal result. These people are offered another test to look further inside the large bowel. This test is usually a colonoscopy. A colonoscopy is similar to the bowel scope test.

We have more information about these tests in our booklet **Understanding bowel cancer screening** (see page 27).

Screening for people with a high bowel cancer risk

Some people have a higher risk of bowel cancer because they:

- have a bowel condition such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease
- have a family history that means bowel cancer is more likely
- have an inherited gene mutation that means bowel cancer is more likely.

People with a higher risk may start bowel screening at a younger age or have tests more often. They are not usually offered a home-testing kit. Instead, they may be offered a regular colonoscopy to check the large bowel.

Your doctor will explain if and how often you need this type of screening.

'Before the colonoscopy, you can be sedated so you don't feel anything. And for your own peace of mind, you can walk away knowing, instead of guessing, what may be in there.'

Sharon

When cancer runs in families

Most gene mutations that lead to cancer happen during a person's lifetime are caused by lifestyle and environmental factors. These types of mutation build up with age. This is why most types of cancer are more common in older people.

But it is also possible for a gene mutation to run through a family passing from parent to child. This is called an inherited mutation.

Some inherited mutations make a person more likely to develop certain types of cancer. They may make cancer more likely at a younger age. Having a gene mutation like this does not mean you have cancer. Instead, it means you have a higher risk of developing some types of cancer.

It is important to remember that cancer is very common and most of us have relatives who have had cancer. This does not always mean there is an inherited gene mutation in your family, or that you have a higher risk of cancer.

Less than 5 in 100 cases of cancer (5%) are linked to an inherited gene mutation.

Understanding your family history

Families affected by an inherited gene mutation linked to bowel cancer may have a pattern of cancers in the family. These are examples of patterns:

- One of your first-degree relatives was diagnosed with bowel cancer before the age of 50 (first-degree relatives are your parents, brothers, sisters and children).
- One of your first-degree relatives and one of their first-degree relatives were diagnosed with bowel cancer at any age (for example, your father and his sister).
- You have relatives on the same side of the family with bowel cancer, womb cancer or cancer of the ovary, stomach, pancreas, small bowel or ureter and renal pelvis.
- You have relatives who have a condition that causes multiple growths called polyps in the bowel.
- You have relatives who have a condition called Lynch syndrome.

If you are worried about cancer in your family

If you are worried about the pattern of cancer in your family, talk to your GP. They may be able to reassure you, or they can refer you to a genetics specialist.

If you meet a genetics specialist, they will talk to you about your family's history of cancer. They will explain if you are likely to have a higher risk of cancer because of the pattern of cancer in your family.

If they think you may carry an inherited gene mutation, you may be offered a blood test to check. This is called **genetic testing**. You might have this test if:

- you are diagnosed with a cancer that is likely to be linked to an inherited mutation
- a close blood relative (such as a parent, brother or sister) has already had a test that found an inherited mutation.

If you have an inherited mutation, or your family history shows you have a higher risk of cancer, you may be offered:

- treatments to reduce the risk
- extra cancer screening.

We have more information for people with an inherited risk of cancer (see page 27).

Further information and support

We provide expert, up-to-date information about cancer. And all our information is free for everyone.

If you are still worried

Most people worry about their health at some point in their lives.

For some, thinking about their risk of a health condition such as cancer helps them make positive lifestyle changes.

Sometimes, health worries are more complicated.

If you have more questions, or you cannot stop worrying about your health, it can help to talk to someone:

- Your GP may be able to help or give you information about counselling services in your area.
- Call our cancer support specialists on **0808 808 00 00** (7 days a week, 8am to 8pm).

Order our information

We have a wide range of cancer information available to order for free at be.macmillan.org.uk. You can also order our information by calling us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Deaf or hard of hearing?

Use NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**

Non-English speaker?

Interpreters are available. Alternatively, visit macmillan.org.uk

All of our information is also available at macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support

Related resources

We have more information about cancer risk and cancer genetics in the following resources:

- **Cancer genetics: how cancer sometimes runs in families**
- **Are you worried about cancer?**
- **Are you worried about breast cancer?**
- **Are you worried about ovarian cancer?**
- **Are you worried about prostate cancer?**

Other useful organisations

There are lots of other organisations that can give you information or support.

Bowel cancer support organisations

Bowel Cancer UK

Tel 020 7940 1760

Email nurse@

bowelcanceruk.org.uk

www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk

Raises awareness of bowel cancer and campaigns for best treatment and care. Provides information and support.

PolyPeople

Email contact@

polypeople.online

www.polypeople.online

PolyPeople is a support group for people with polyposis syndromes.

The Polyposis Registry

Tel 0208 235 4270

Email LNWH-tr.polyposisregistry@nhs.net

www.polyposisregistry.org.uk

The Polyposis Registry is the UK's only specialist centre for patients with a polyposis syndrome. The nurse practitioners run an advice line for anyone with a polyposis syndrome – you do not have to be one of their patients. It is based at St Mark's Hospital, Harrow.

General health information

Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland

www.hscni.net

Provides information about health and social care services in Northern Ireland.

NHS.UK

www.nhs.uk

The UK's biggest health information website. Has service information for England.

NHS Direct Wales

www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

NHS health information site for Wales.

NHS Inform

Helpline 0800 22 44 88

(Mon to Fri, 8am to 10pm, Sat and Sun, 9am to 5pm)

www.nhsinform.scot

NHS health information site for Scotland.

Disclaimer

We make every effort to ensure that the information we provide is accurate and up to date but it should not be relied upon as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. So far as is permitted by law, Macmillan does not accept liability in relation to the use of any information contained in this publication, or third-party information or websites included or referred to in it. Some photos are of models.

Thanks

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We welcome feedback on our information. If you have any, please contact **cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk**

Sources

If you would like information about the sources we use, please contact us at **cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk**

People worry about cancer for many different reasons. Perhaps you have a family member or friend who has been diagnosed. Or maybe you have symptoms you think might be cancer.

This leaflet explains what we know about the main causes of bowel cancer. It also explains what you can do to reduce your risk of developing cancer.

We're here to help everyone with cancer live life as fully as they can, providing physical, financial and emotional support. So whatever cancer throws your way, we're right there with you. For information, support or just someone to talk to, call **0808 808 00 00** (7 days a week, 8am to 8pm) or visit **macmillan.org.uk**

Would you prefer to speak to us in another language? Interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use. Are you deaf or hard of hearing? Call us using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app.

Need information in different languages or formats? We produce information in audio, eBooks, easy read, Braille, large print and translations. To order these, visit **macmillan.org.uk/otherformats** or call our support line.

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