

Don't sit
on your
symptoms



Find out about
bowel cancer

www.beatingbowelcancer.org



Let's talk about bowels and bottoms

Most of us, at some time in our lives, suffer from problems with our bowel and bottoms. Although it's sometimes embarrassing to talk about, you'd be surprised how many people will have experienced the same symptoms as you. There are lots of common conditions that could cause changes in the workings of the bowels, pain and bleeding from the bottom.

In most cases, it won't be cancer.

But how can you tell if you have a simple condition that might get better, or something more serious?

In this leaflet, you will find:

- explanation of the main symptoms of bowel cancer
- other conditions that could be causing your symptoms
- advice on what you'll be asked in the doctor's surgery

What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is cancer in any part of the colon or rectum that form most of the large intestine or bowel. If it is not treated, it will increase in size and may cause blockage or can ulcerate leading to blood loss and anaemia.

How common is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is the second most deadly cancer in this country. 35,600 people are diagnosed with the disease each year, and over 45% will sadly die as a result. That's 46 people dying every day – men and women, young and old.

➤ **Yet the comforting news is that bowel cancer is one of the most curable cancers if caught early enough.**

- over **90%** of cases of bowel cancer could be completely cured if it is diagnosed in time and treated.
- Therefore, it is vitally important to look out for possible symptoms, and **have symptoms investigated if they persist.**

The symptoms of bowel cancer

The most common symptoms are change of bowel habit and rectal bleeding. However, these are also common in people who don't have cancer.

- **Nearly 20% of us experience bleeding from the bottom every year.**
- **Over a third of us experience constipation or diarrhoea at some point in our lives.**

Higher-risk symptoms of bowel cancer

If you have any of these higher-risk symptoms, it is safe to 'watch and wait' for up to six weeks, but if they persist, you should get advice from your GP and ask about further hospital investigation.

Change of Bowel Habit:

- Recent, persistent change of bowel habit to looser, more diarrhoea-like motions, going to the toilet more often, or trying to go.
- Change of bowel habit is especially important if you also have bleeding.

Rectal Bleeding:

- Rectal bleeding that persists with no reason. Bleeding can be due to piles; but if so you will usually have other symptoms eg: straining with hard stools, have a sore bottom, lumps and itching.
- Rectal bleeding in over 60's - piles in older people can be hiding more serious symptoms, so it is especially important to get this investigated.

Other higher-risk symptoms and signs include:

- Unexplained anaemia, found by your GP.
- A lump or mass in your tummy, felt by your GP.
- Persistent, severe abdominal pain, which has come on recently for the first time (especially in an older age group).

- **Most people with these symptoms DO NOT have bowel cancer, but it is very important to have further tests to rule it out.**

What other conditions could cause your symptoms?

Piles or haemorrhoids – these are soft swellings, a bit like spongy varicose veins. They usually have other symptoms like pain and itching. Bright red bleeding on the toilet paper or sudden large amounts of blood are almost always caused by piles. Your GP or pharmacist will be able to recommend various over-the-counter products.

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) –has a collection of symptoms, such as pain and change in bowel habits as the gut becomes more sensitive. Changes to your diet may be recommended by your GP.

Polyps – warty-like growths on the bowel lining, which sometimes cause bleeding. These can be removed painlessly without the need for an operation.

Fissures – split or tear in the lining of the gut, sometimes caused by constipation, but that can be treated with special creams.

Crohns disease – painful inflammation of the gut, which can put you more at risk of bowel cancer and you should talk to your GP about being regularly monitored.

Ulcerative colitis – symptoms such as bleeding and mucus, caused by the bowel becoming inflated. This can put you more at risk of bowel cancer and you should talk to your GP about being regularly monitored.

When to visit your GP

If you are experiencing any of the symptoms in this leaflet, you should make an appointment to see your GP.

- **Don't be embarrassed or scared. Your GP is used to discussing all sorts of conditions every day and will have heard it all before.**
- **It is better to visit your GP early and be reassured and treated, than to hope symptoms will disappear or get better without treatment. A visit to your GP could save your life.**

Over the page, we have put together a list of possible questions that your GP might ask you.

Questions your GP might ask you:

1. **Has the frequency with which you go to the toilet to pass, or try to pass, motions increased; or have your motions become persistently looser over a few weeks, without going back to normal?**

This is the **single most important clue** and patients with this symptom persisting for a few weeks should be referred for hospital investigation **at any age**.

2. **If you haven't had a change of bowel habit, but you do have bleeding from the bottom, have you got any other symptoms such as straining, lumps, soreness, pain or itchiness?**

If you do have these other symptoms, it is highly likely that you have **piles**. If you only have bleeding and no pile or other perianal symptoms, as your doctor might describe it, you should be considered for further tests.

3. **Does bowel cancer run in your family?**

Your GP should ask you this as a matter of course, but remember to mention any family history of bowel cancer during your appointment and ask about **screening options**.

4. **Can I give you a rectal examination and a blood test?**

Again, your GP should offer patients with bleeding a **rectal examination** (a painless, internal check with a gloved finger) in order to feel for any lumps or masses, along with a **blood test** to check for anaemia – both are possible symptoms of bowel cancer.

5. **How long have you been experiencing your symptoms?**

Many symptoms are due to common conditions and **are not bowel cancer**. However, it is important to explain to your GP, as precisely as possible, when symptoms started, particularly if they are **recent** and **persistent**, to ensure that you are correctly diagnosed.

Help us beat bowel cancer

Beating Bowel Cancer is a national charity working to highlight awareness of symptoms, promote early diagnosis and encourage open access to treatment choice for those affected by bowel cancer. Through their work they aim to save lives from this common cancer.

The charity relies almost entirely upon donations and the hard work of fundraisers throughout the country. The annual 'Loud Tie Campaign' encourages people to wear wild and wacky ties, and raise awareness and funds to help Beating Bowel Cancer continue its good work.

For further information about the charity and fundraising campaigns, visit

www.beatingbowelcancer.org

If you would like to contact us, or make a donation, our address is:

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