



What to expect during each stage of treatment and beyond

## Bowel Cancer

This information sheet tells you what you can ask for before, during and after your bowel cancer treatment. You can ask your team for more information and support.

Working with your team means you can make sure you are getting the treatment, information and support that are right for you.

### 1. Screening

Some bowel cancers are found in screening. Screening is where you can do a test at home or at your check-up called a faecal occult blood test (FOBT). This is an easy test where a small sample of your faeces or poo is checked to see if there is

blood in it. The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program is free for anyone over 50 years old. You should do the test every two years. You can ask your doctor for more information.

### 2. Your doctor visit

Your doctor should do a check up to see if they can find what is making you feel unwell. They will ask you about any symptoms you might be having:

- Blood in your faeces or poo
- Change in how often you need to go to the toilet
- Pain in your abdomen or stomach area
- A lump, hardness or change in your stomach area
- Losing weight quickly, or for no reason

Your doctor should work with you to make sure you have the information and support you need.

You can ask your doctor about:

- What is happening in your body and why it could be happening
- What will or might happen
- How you are feeling and how to stay emotionally healthy
- Who you can talk to about getting the support you need
- Where you can get more information and support

Your doctor might do tests to check for bowel cancer:

#### Digital rectal examination

The doctor might do this test during your check-up. They will wear gloves and put one of their fingers in to your anus. The doctor will check to see if they can feel any problems with the anus or rectum. These are the parts just inside your bottom.

#### Blood tests

You might have a blood test. In the blood test the doctor will take a sample of your blood and test it to check your health. They will also look for signs that you might be losing blood in your stools or poo.

Your doctor might send you to get more tests with a specialist. Your specialist is a doctor that is trained in working with people with bowel cancer. Your doctor should give the specialist information on your health in the past, if someone else in your family has cancer and your test results.

## 2. Your doctor visit cont'd

You can ask the specialist:

- What tests you are going to have
- What will happen in the tests
- What the tests will tell you

**You can bring a family member or friend to your visits. You can ask your doctor for more information and support to make sure you have what you need.**

## 3. Tests

The specialist will do a test called a colonoscopy to see if you have bowel cancer. This is called a diagnosis.

### Colonoscopy

This is a test where a little camera on a tube is inserted in to the anus. The specialist will use this to look at the bowel to see if there is anything wrong with it. This is done under anaesthetic so you cannot feel it. Your doctor or specialist should talk to you about what you need to do before you have a colonoscopy.

If the specialist cannot find anything you might not need any other tests.

If you do have bowel cancer, the specialist will do more tests to see if the cancer is growing or if it has spread. This is called staging.

You might have one test or a mix of tests:

### Magnetic resonance imaging scan (MRI)

A scan where magnetic fields and radio waves are used to make a detailed picture of the body.

### Computed tomography scan (CT scan)

Computers and x-rays are used to make a detailed picture of the bowel.

### Ultrasound scan

Sound waves are used to make a picture of the bowel.

**You can ask your doctor about finding a bowel cancer peer support group. It can help knowing that there are other people who understand what you are going through.**

**Your friends and family can talk to a support group for carers.**

## 4. Treatment

Your specialist should work with a team. Your team is made up of people that understand bowel cancer.

Your team will review your test results. They should ask you what you want and need. You should work together to make the best plan for your treatment.

You can ask your team:

- What treatment you are having
- Why you are having that treatment
- What will happen in that treatment
- What the treatment will do
- How long the treatment will take
- Risks and benefits of the treatment

- How you might feel during the treatment, side effects and what you can do to feel as well as possible
- What you can expect after the treatment

Your team might suggest you take part in a clinical trial. A clinical trial is used to test a new treatment, or to see if a treatment works better than another. You can ask for more time, or a second opinion before you decide on your treatment.

Complementary therapies include things like massage, acupuncture and meditation as well as other medicines you might take at the same time as your treatment. Some therapies might not work well with your treatment.

## 4. Treatment cont'd

It is very important to talk to your team about any complementary therapies you are using, or would like to use.

You might have one treatment or a mix of treatments:

**Surgery** is where the cancer is cut out.

It is the most common treatment for people with bowel cancer.

**Radiation therapy** or radiotherapy is where radiation is used to stop the cancer growing.

It might be used if surgery is not a good option. Radiation therapy might be used if you have a rectal tumour or growth in your rectum.

**Chemotherapy** or drug therapy is where drugs are used to stop the cancer growing.

It might be used before or after surgery. Chemotherapy might be used alone, or with radiation therapy.

**Your team should talk to you about your needs before, during and after your treatment. You can ask for information and support at any time to make sure you have everything you need.**

**Your team can connect you with other services and health professionals to make sure you stay physically and emotionally healthy.**

## 4. After your treatment

You can talk to your team about any changes you have going to the toilet or eating after your treatment. It is normal to feel changes after your treatment. These changes might mean that you need to get a stoma. A stoma is a surgery where a small opening is made from the bowel to the outside of the body. A little bag is attached and your waste or poo will pass in to the bag. You might have the stoma for a short time, or forever. Your team should connect you to a stoma therapy nurse or dietitian. They are trained to give you information and support about the surgery, and what will happen after it. You can ask your team for more information and support.

There are a lot of ways to make sure you feel healthy after your treatment. You can work with your team to make sure you can get back to doing what you like as soon as you are ready.

After your treatment is finished, your team should give you a treatment summary. Your treatment summary has all of the information on the treatment you received:

- Tests you had to diagnose your bowel cancer, and the results of these tests
- Treatment you had, and when you had it

- Support services and other treatment plans you received

Your team should work with you to make a plan now that your treatment is finished. You should have a follow-up plan that includes:

- The follow-up that is best for you
- Plans for managing any side effects of treatment
- How to get help quickly if you think your cancer has come back or got worse

Your doctor should work with you and talk about:

- Finding more information and support to keep physically and emotionally healthy, and get what you need
- Signs and symptoms to look for that might mean the cancer is coming back
- Prevention and healthy living

**Sometimes bowel cancer can come back after treatment. It is usually found at a follow-up visit, or if you notice any symptoms come back. It is important to have regular check-ups. If you notice anything different go to your doctor. You can ask your doctor for a check-up and for information and support.**

## 5. Living with cancer

### Side effects

Some people get side effects during and after their treatment. Side effects are your body responding to the treatment you are having. They are normal, but can make you feel unwell. You might have side effects straight away, not at all, or months after your treatment.

You can talk to your doctor about your side effects or **visit** [www.cancervic.org.au/about-cancer/survivors/long-term-side-effects](http://www.cancervic.org.au/about-cancer/survivors/long-term-side-effects)

### Advance care plan

Your team might work with you to make an advance care plan. An advance care plan is a way of setting out your wishes and making sure everyone knows what you want in future medical care.

You can talk to your doctor about making an advance care plan together or **visit** [www.advancecareplanning.org.au](http://www.advancecareplanning.org.au)

### Palliative care

Palliative care is used at different stages of your treatment to help you feel well. Palliative care can help with pain relief, to reduce your symptoms and to improve your quality of life.

You can talk to your doctor about the type of

palliative care that is best for you or **visit** [www.palliativecare.org.au](http://www.palliativecare.org.au)

### Cost

There are costs at every stage of your cancer including treatment, accommodation and travel. You might have costs if you are having treatment in a private health service even if you have private health insurance. You can talk to your team and your private health insurer if you have questions about the cost of each treatment you might have. You can also talk to the social worker at your hospital.

You can talk to your doctor about the cost of your treatment or **visit** [www.canceraustralia.gov.au/affected-cancer/living-cancer/dealing-practical-aspects-cancer/costs-treatment](http://www.canceraustralia.gov.au/affected-cancer/living-cancer/dealing-practical-aspects-cancer/costs-treatment)

You can talk to your doctor about the cost of accommodation and travel or **visit** [www.cancercouncil.com.au/get-support/practical-support-services](http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/get-support/practical-support-services)

**There are a lot of things to think about when you have bowel cancer. There is also a lot of information and support. It is important that you do what is right for you. You can work with your team to make sure you have the best care.**

## Information and support

### Cancer Council

- You can talk to a cancer nurse: **13 11 20**
-  If you need an interpreter: **13 14 50**

### Bowel Cancer Australia

- Information and support: **1800 555 494**
- [www.bowelcanceraustralia.org](http://www.bowelcanceraustralia.org)

### Carers Australia

- Information and support for carers: **1800 242 636**

For more information visit  
[www.cancerpathways.org.au](http://www.cancerpathways.org.au)



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