

Decreasing your risk of bowel cancer

What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is cancer of any part of the large intestine (colon or rectum). It is also known as colorectal cancer and may be referred to as colon cancer (affecting the upstream part of the large intestine) or rectal cancer (affecting the last 15 cm of the large intestine).

It is one of the commonest cancers in Australia and New Zealand, affecting approximately 1 in 21 people over the course of their life.

While bowel cancer is curable in its early stages it is preferable to avoid it if possible. There are some risk factors that we cannot influence such as increased age and genetics, but it is estimated that at least 40-50% of bowel cancers are potentially preventable by modifying lifestyle and dietary factors.

Can I influence my risk of developing bowel cancer?

There are 6 main ways to decrease your risk of developing bowel cancer.



1. Limit your alcohol intake.

It is recommended that you limit alcohol intake to no more than 2 standard drinks per day for men and one standard drink per day for women in order to decrease the risk of developing bowel cancer.



3. Keep your weight within a healthy range.

This should be achieved by a combination of exercise and limiting your energy and fat intake. Limiting the total energy intake to less than 10,000 kilojoules in men and 8,000 kilojoules in women per day has been shown to decrease your risk of developing bowel cancer.



5. Don't smoke.

Regular smokers are more likely than non-smokers to develop and die from bowel cancer.



2. Exercise regularly and avoid being sedentary.

If you are not physically active on a regular basis you stand to have an increased risk of developing bowel cancer. Increasing your regular activity during the day by walking, standing and being mobile is useful to reduce your risk. In addition to this regular vigorous physical activity such as running, cycling, swimming or cross training for at least 30 minutes, three times a week is desirable in order to minimize your chances of developing bowel cancer.



4. Maintain a healthy diet.

In addition to limiting your energy intake, a diet high in fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and fibre and low in processed and red meat has been shown to be effective in reducing bowel cancer risk. Milk and calcium rich foods are also protective against bowel cancer. ***Fibre supplementation is also helpful - take 2-3 teaspoons / capsules of Metamucil, Benefiber or psyllium husk a day. ***Reduce red meat to 700g a week and only occasional processed meats.



6. Get screened for bowel cancer.

Screening is testing for cancer, or precancerous lesions (polyps), before symptoms develop. The current Australian recommendations are for people aged between 50 to 75 to have stool tests looking for hidden blood (Faecal Occult Blood: FOB tests) every 2 years. This can be performed through your GP or using the kits that are sent out in the mail as part of the NBCSP (National Bowel Cancer Screening Program).

For some groups of people at higher risk of developing bowel cancer, therapy with aspirin may be useful as a preventative strategy. If you feel that you are at higher risk it may be worthwhile discussing this option with your doctor.

Colorectal Surgical Society of Australia and New Zealand (CSSANZ)

Members of the Society are surgical specialists practising exclusively in colorectal surgery - the management of diseases of the large bowel (colon), rectum, anus and small bowel. After completing general surgery training they have completed a further period of training and research in colorectal surgery. The Society's mission is the maintenance of high standards in colorectal surgery and colonoscopy in Australia and New Zealand through the training of colorectal surgeons and the education of its members, and to promote awareness, prevention and early detection of colorectal diseases in the community.

The CSSANZ Foundation is a trust with a board of governors whose objective is to support high quality research projects for colorectal surgeons in training and our members. Donations to the CSSANZ Foundation are fully tax deductible in Australia and can be sent to:

CSSANZ Foundation Pty Ltd
Suite 6, 9 Church St, Hawthorn,
VIC 3122, Australia