

# NHS BOWEL CANCER SCREENING PROGRAMME

## Frequently asked questions

### **Why is a bowel cancer screening programme being introduced?**

Bowel cancer is the second most common cause of cancer deaths in the UK. Research has shown that screening men and women for bowel cancer using a (guaiac based) Faecal Occult Blood (FOB) test can reduce the mortality rate from bowel cancer by 16 per cent in those invited for screening. The programme follows successful pilot studies in Coventry, North Warwickshire and Scotland.

### **How can people take part in bowel cancer screening?**

The programme will be phased in across England over three years. Men and women aged 60-69 and registered with a GP will be offered an FOB test every two years. Those aged 70 and over will not be invited automatically but can request a test kit by calling a Freephone helpline on 0800 707 60 60.

Anyone concerned about their health or their risk of developing bowel cancer, should contact their GP.

### **Will lives be saved by bowel cancer screening?**

Research has shown that screening men and women for bowel cancer using the FOB test can reduce the death rate in those invited for screening (1). Nationally, screening for bowel cancer could save hundreds of lives a year.

### **Why invite men and women aged between 60 and 69?**

The NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme aims to invite the group of men and women who will benefit most from a population-based screening programme. The risk of bowel cancer increases with age, with 80 per cent of bowel cancers occurring in people who are 60 or over (2).

Findings from the English Bowel Cancer Screening Pilot also showed that people in their 60s are more likely to accept their invitation for bowel cancer screening.

### **What information is available about the NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme?**

All men and women who receive an invitation will also receive a leaflet entitled '*Bowel Cancer Screening – The Facts*' developed by Cancer Research UK. This leaflet explains bowel screening and the benefits and limitations of the test and supports men and women in making an informed decision about whether or not to take up the opportunity of screening. A freephone helpline, 0800 707 60 60, provides additional support to those taking up the offer of bowel cancer screening. Information on the NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme can also be found on the website [www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk](http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk)

## The Test

### **What is a Faecal Occult Blood (FOB) test?**

The FOB test kit is used to collect small samples from bowel motions which are then analysed to detect traces of blood that may not be visible to the naked eye.

### **Does the test diagnose cancer?**

No, the FOB test is not a diagnostic test for cancer. Results will, however, indicate whether further investigations are required.

### **What is involved in completing the test?**

Those eligible for screening will receive a kit that can be used in the privacy of their home. Small samples from three separate bowel motions are collected and using the cardboard sticks provided, spread onto the 'windows' of the test kit card. The test kit is then posted back to the laboratory in a specially designed pre-paid envelope within two weeks (14 days) of the first sample being taken.

### **What happens after the kit has been sent back?**

The test kit is processed and the results issued by post within two weeks (14 days) of the date of receipt by the laboratory.

### **What quality assurance is in place?**

The NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme has stringent quality assurance guidelines. As part of this, every FOB test kit is uniquely bar-coded. Before the test kits are sent out, the barcodes are linked with individual records on the national call and recall system. This means that when the test kit is returned it is clearly identifiable as belonging to a specific individual.

### **Will GPs know that their patients are being tested and what their results are?**

GPs are not directly involved in the delivery of the NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme. They will however, be notified when invitations for bowel cancer screening are being sent out in their area. They will also receive a copy of the results letters sent to their patients. A freephone helpline (0800 707 60 60) has been set up to provide additional support to those taking up the offer of bowel cancer screening.

### **Will people be reminded if they forget to return their kit?**

Anyone who does not wish to participate in the programme can decline the offer of screening by contacting the programme hub following receipt of their invitation. If a person who has not declined screening does not return their test kit, a reminder will be sent to them around four weeks from when their kit was despatched.

## **Bowel Cancer**

### **How does bowel cancer develop?**

Bowel cancer is also known as colon, rectal or colorectal cancer. The lining of the bowel is made up of cells that are constantly being renewed. Sometimes these cells grow too quickly forming a clump of cells known as a bowel polyp. Polyps are not bowel cancers but they can develop into cancer over a number of years. Bowel cancer can develop in any part the large bowel, including the colon and the rectum.

### **Who is at risk from bowel cancer?**

Bowel cancer is the second most common cause of cancer deaths in the UK. The biggest single risk factor for bowel cancer is age and eight out of ten people who get bowel cancer are over the age of 60. Diet, lifestyle and family history can also affect a person's chances of developing bowel cancer.

- The lifetime risk of developing bowel cancer for men is around one in 18.
- The lifetime risk of developing bowel cancer for women is around one in 20.

Anyone concerned about their health or their risk of developing bowel cancer should contact their GP.

### **Bowel cancer symptoms**

The symptoms of bowel cancer may vary and not everyone will have them. The most common symptoms to look out for are:

- a persistent change in bowel habit, especially going more often or looser stools for several weeks
- bleeding from the bottom without any obvious reason
- a lump in the tummy

It should be remembered that most of these symptoms will not be cancer. If someone has experienced one or more of these symptoms for more than four to six weeks, they should visit their GP.

**For further information on the NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme go to**  
[www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk](http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk)

*1 Screening for colorectal cancer using the faecal occult blood test: an update. (2006) Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*

*2 Cancer Research UK*