Why are bowel motions tested?

The NHS Bowel Cancer Screening programme sends everyone aged 60-69 a faecal occult blood test (called the kit) every two years. “Occult” means “hidden” and the kit can detect traces of blood that you normally cannot see in your bowel motions. Blood in your bowel motions can be caused by many things – it does not always mean that you have bowel cancer.

You will need to take a sample of your bowel motion on three (3) separate visits to the toilet. If you keep everything you need within reach of the toilet, it will be easier to do the test.

“It will take too much time”

Collecting a sample of your bowel motion should only take a minute or two of your time. Make sure you have everything you need to do the kit within easy reach when you are sitting on the toilet, this should make it even quicker. As well as your kit, you will need a pen and whatever you choose to use to collect your sample.

“It will be too messy”

There are a number of easy ways to make sure that collecting your sample is not too messy or unpleasant. Take a moment to think about which way would suit you best from the following ways:

- fold several pieces of toilet paper over your hand and catch part of your bowel motion before it goes in the toilet water
- a plastic or rubber glove with the folded toilet paper (you can get these from a chemist or supermarket)
- wrap a small plastic bag around your hand (you can also use this to dispose of the cardboard sticks in an outside bin)
- use a small plastic container that you can firmly hold or safely rest in the toilet bowl. A clean plastic take-away container or something similar is fine. Covering the container with several pieces of toilet paper will make it easier to dispose of the bowel motion and clean the container

For people with loose bowel motions or diarrhoea:

You can still do the test. Having loose bowel motions will not affect the test result. It may be easier to use a container to collect your samples if you have loose bowel motions.

For people who have irregular bowel movements:

Constipation is common; it affects about 1 in 8 people. It may take a little longer to collect your three samples, but you can still do the test. After taking your first sample, you still have 14 days to take two more samples and return the kit.

Storing Your Sample

It is a good idea to keep your kit in a handy place near your toilet. You will need to keep your kit in a handy place near your toilet. Please remember to keep the kit away from direct sunlight or heat. Although the kit is unlikely to smell, you can:

- put the kit in an envelope
- keep the kit in a container with a lid


For further information or support around using this resource in your area, please contact the early diagnosis team at earlydiagnosis@cancer.org.uk
Returning Your Kit
You have 14 days after taking your first sample to return the kit to the Screening Centre. If at all possible, try to post the kit earlier in the week as kits are not tested on weekends. The hygienic envelope is completely safe to send in the post.

Any Questions?
If you have any questions about the kit or bowel cancer screening then you can call:

Freephone - 0800 707 60 60

All calls are answered by trained staff and are dealt with in the strictest confidence. Please do not feel embarrassed to ask for more information or advice.

Keep an Eye on Symptoms
Although screening can improve your chances of detecting bowel cancer, it is very important to keep an eye out for any of the following symptoms:

- a persistent change in bowel habit, especially going to the toilet more often or diarrhoea for several weeks;
- bleeding from the back passage without any obvious reason
- abdominal pain, especially if it is severe
- a lump in your abdomen

Please see your GP if you develop any of these symptoms.

Help with the Test
Tips and Advice on How to Collect, Store and Return Your Bowel Cancer Screening Kit

Should I Do the Test?
This leaflet is for people who:

- don’t think they are at risk of bowel cancer
- not quite sure how to collect their three (3) samples
- think that it will take too much time
- think that it will be too messy
- suffer from constipation or loose bowel motions
- are a bit embarrassed to ask for help

If you see yourself as one of these people, then this leaflet will give you advice and easy-to-follow suggestions on how you can complete the NHS Bowel Cancer Screening kit.

Returning your screening kit can:

- reduce your risk of dying from bowel cancer
- increase the chance of detecting a bowel polyp before it develops into bowel cancer

Bowel cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths in the UK (more than breast or prostate cancer). Eight out of 10 people who are diagnosed with bowel cancer are aged over 60. Both men and women are at risk of developing bowel cancer.


For further information or support around using this resource in your area, please contact the early diagnosis team at earlydiagnosis@cancer.org.uk