

# Symptoms and Screening



**Bowel  
Cancer  
Ireland**

Awareness,  
Advocacy and  
Peer Support for  
Colorectal Cancers.



# Bowel Cancer

## What you need to know

Bowel cancer – also called colorectal cancer – affects the large bowel, including the colon and rectum. It is a growing public-health issue in Ireland.

Around 2,800 people are diagnosed with bowel cancer each year, affecting both men and women of all ages.

It is the second most common cause of cancer-related death in the country, after lung cancer.

Risk increases with age, and most diagnoses occur in people over 50. However, bowel cancer can also affect younger adults. Data from the National Cancer Registry show that the number of cases in people under 50 has almost doubled in the past 25 years. This under 50 group is also more likely to be diagnosed with late-stage cancers compared to older people who are routinely screened.

Early detection and treatment bring major benefits. When bowel cancer is found at the earliest stage (Stage I), around 97% of people survive for five years or more. Survival rates drop sharply at later stages. For example, Stage IV bowel cancer has a five-year survival rate of around 14%.

Early-stage bowel cancer usually has no symptoms. Because of this, knowing when to seek help and seeking out screening can save lives.

### Know the signs and symptoms

In its early stages, bowel cancer does not always cause symptoms. When symptoms do appear, they can be subtle and are often mistaken for less serious conditions.



### Common symptoms include:

- **Blood in your stool**
- **A persistent change in bowel habit, such as diarrhoea, constipation or thinner stools**
- **Ongoing abdominal pain, cramps, or bloating**
- **Feeling unusually tired or breathless**
- **Unexplained weight loss**

### Don't ignore persistent symptoms

These symptoms do not always mean cancer. But if they persist, worsen, or feel unusual for you, it is important to speak to your GP.

Men often wait to seek help until their symptoms are severe. Meanwhile, women's symptoms are frequently dismissed or blamed on other causes.

That is why it is essential to trust your instincts, be persistent, and advocate for yourself until you are heard.

### Screening saves lives

Screening can spot bowel cancer before symptoms show up. It can also find early changes in the bowel that might turn into cancer later.

In Ireland, screening begins with a FIT test (Faecal Immunochemical Test). This is a simple home test where you take a very small stool sample and send it to a laboratory to check for tiny traces of blood. The test is completely non-invasive, takes only minutes to complete, and is done in the privacy of your own home.

If a FIT test shows an abnormal result, a colonoscopy may be recommended. This is a routine medical procedure that allows doctors to examine the bowel using a very thin, flexible camera. You are offered medication to help you relax, and the procedure typically takes 20 to 45 minutes.

Doctors can spot and remove pre-cancerous polyps during a colonoscopy. This often stops cancer from forming. When bowel cancer is found early through screening, treatment can be simpler and is often curative.



### HSE BowelScreen programme

In Ireland, the Health Service Executive runs a free national bowel cancer screening programme called BowelScreen. In 2026, this is offered to people aged 58 to 70.

Eligible adults are not sent a FIT test automatically. Instead, the HSE sends an invitation letter, asking you to confirm that you wish to take part. Once you consent, a FIT test kit will be posted to you. Invitations are then repeated every two years while you remain within the eligible age range.

To take part, you must be on the BowelScreen register. Most people are added automatically using HSE and Department of Social Protection records.

If you are unsure whether you are registered, you can check this by visiting [bit.ly/CheckBowelScreen](https://bit.ly/CheckBowelScreen) or by phoning 1800 45 45 55.

If you're in the eligible age range, you can also request a free FIT test kit through participating community pharmacies.



## The growth in early-onset cancers

Rates of bowel cancer in people under 50 are rising worldwide, including in Ireland. Many younger people are diagnosed at a later stage because symptoms were overlooked or dismissed.

Earlier screening means earlier detection, simpler treatment, and better outcomes. Bowel Cancer Ireland wants to lower the routine screening age. This change would help Ireland match international standards and best practices.

In 2026, BowelScreen starts at age 58. In contrast, the United States suggests screening for colorectal cancer should start at age 45. In the UK, people are invited for bowel screening from age 50.

### Once you turn 45, or at any age with ongoing symptoms, you should:

- Talk to your GP every year about self-pay bowel cancer screening
- Discuss your family history, and any persistent symptoms
- Ask what screening or referral options are appropriate for you
- Until BowelScreen lowers the screening age, younger adults must advocate for themselves.
- **Don't wait for free screening - act now to stay well**

## Treatment, support, and living beyond diagnosis

Treatment for bowel cancer depends on the stage and type of cancer. It may include surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or newer targeted treatments. Many people go on to live full and active lives after treatment.

A diagnosis affects more than the body. Emotional, practical, and psychological support all matter.

Bowel Cancer Ireland is a volunteer community run by people with lived experience of bowel cancer. We offer peer support, shared understanding, and patient advocacy. Whether you are living with cancer, supporting someone you love, or navigating life after treatment, you are not alone.

**Visit [bowelcancer.ie/resources](https://www.bowelcancer.ie/resources) for links to reliable information and for booklets from trusted sources.**



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