

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBCSP)

What is the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program?

The Australian Government's National Bowel Cancer Screening Program is for people, aged 45 to 74 who have no signs or symptoms of bowel cancer. The program aims to reduce deaths from bowel cancer by detecting early signs of the disease.

What is bowel cancer and how does it occur?

Bowel cancer can often appear with no symptoms, family history and even in people who follow a healthy lifestyle. The bowel is made up of cells. In a healthy bowel, old cells are constantly replaced by new cells. However, sometimes cells can grow into small lumps and become polyps.

A polyp is a small growth on the lining of the bowel. Many polyps are harmless, but over time, some can grow into bowel cancer. Tiny amounts of blood can leak from polyps and bowel cancers. The free at-home bowel screening test can find this blood.

Who can take part in the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program?

Australian's aged 45 to 74 who have a green Medicare card can do the test. People aged 45 to 49 can request their first free kit and people aged 50 to 74 are automatically mailed a kit every 2 years. For more information visit the National Bowel Cancer Screening website at www.health.gov.au/nbcsp or call the National Cancer Screening Register on 1800 627 701.

Why is it important to do the screening test?

Bowel cancer is Australia's second biggest cancer killer yet if found early, over 90% of bowel cancers can be successfully treated.

Why is bowel cancer screening important for First Nations peoples?

Bowel cancer affects our mob at higher rates and younger ages. But when found early, it can almost always be treated successfully. Regular screening keeps you strong for your family and community.

Can I get help from my Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service (ACCHS)?

Yes. Your local ACCHS can give culturally safe support. They can explain the test, order a replacement kit, and even provide the kit during a health check.

Is it important for my family and community to know about bowel screening?

Staying healthy and strong helps protect not just you, but your whole family and community. When we look after our health, we can continue to care for our loved ones and share our knowledge and culture. You can encourage other family members who are eligible to do their screening as well.



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What if I'm younger than 45 but have a family history of bowel cancer?

If you're worried about bowel cancer or have a family history, yarn with your doctor or Aboriginal health worker. The free program starts at 45 for those who request their first kit, but your doctor might recommend earlier screening with a kit covered by the Medicare Benefits Schedule.

What's in the test kit?

The test kit has everything you need to collect two samples and comes with instructions and a pre-paid envelope to mail them off for testing.

How do you do the test?

Collect a sample from two different poos, ideally within three days of each other. The samples need to be kept somewhere cool like the fridge or a cooler (never the freezer). Post both your samples for testing within 24 hours of collecting the second sample. Postage is free.

For extra help, you can call the Test Kit Helpline on 1800 930 998. You can also watch a video on how to do the test at www.health.gov.au/nbcsp-kit-video.

Where can I keep my kit if I don't have a fridge?

If you don't have a fridge or cooler at home, yarn with your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker, ACCHS, or GP. You may be able to use a cooler box with ice bricks. You can also call the Test Kit Helpline on 1800 930 998 for advice.

How do I get the result from my test?

You should receive a letter with your test result within four weeks after you post your samples back for testing.

What about people outside of the screening age range?

People outside the screening age range of 45 to 74, should talk with their doctor about screening options. Your doctor may recommend bowel screening available via Medicare. Bowel screening kits are also available for purchase at pharmacies or online.

Are there a lot of Australians diagnosed with bowel cancer each year?

Bowel cancer is one of the most common cancers in Australia, and causes more than 5,000 deaths each year. But the good news is that finding it early saves lives.

How can we help ourselves stay healthy when it comes to bowel cancer?

The simple answer for people aged 45 to 74, is to do the free National Bowel Cancer Screening test every 2 years. The test is for people without any symptoms of bowel cancer, which means this is a preventative health measure you should be doing regularly.

So, what happens if the test result is positive?

A positive result does not necessarily mean cancer, it just means you need to have a conversation with your doctor on the next steps. If polyps are found early, they can be easily removed, usually during a colonoscopy. This reduces the risk of developing bowel cancer.



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How many people do the test?

Around six million people are invited to do the test every two years. However, only about 42% of those six million people are completing it. That's almost 60% of Australians who could be taking better preventative health measures and catching a potentially life-threatening cancer early, when it is more treatable.

What is the risk of developing bowel cancer?

The risk of bowel cancer increases with age. In Australia, the lifetime risk of developing bowel cancer by the age of 85 is around one in 19 for men and one in 23 for women*.

What are the symptoms of bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer can develop without any obvious symptoms. This is why it is important to screen.

Symptoms can include:

- blood in your poo or in the toilet bowl
- a recent and persistent change in your toilet habit, such as looser poos, severe constipation
- and/or if you need to poo more often than usual
- unexplained tiredness or weight loss
- stomach pain.

People who have any symptoms of bowel cancer should not screen with the program.

If you notice any symptoms, speak to your doctor without delay.

Do the test kits have an expiry date?

Yes. Each test kit has an expiry date. This can be found on the back of the test kit. To avoid your kit expiring, place it where you will remember to do it. In the toilet or bathroom is a good place.

If your test kit has expired, please throw it away and order a replacement kit by contacting the National Cancer Screening Register on 1800 627 701 or at www.ncsr.gov.au/boweltest. Have your participant number or Medicare number ready.

What do I do if my kit didn't show up?

If you are aged between 50 to 74 and haven't received a bowel screening test kit, check that your address with Medicare is up to date. The test kit will be sent to the address you use for Medicare.

Your address registered with Medicare can be updated by:

- Using your Medicare online account through myGov.
- Using the Express Plus Medicare mobile app.
- Calling Medicare on 132 011.

You can also contact the National Cancer Screening Register on 1800 627 701 or at www.ncsr.gov.au.

What if I threw out or misplaced my screening kit?

If you have lost or thrown away your test kit, you can order a free replacement kit by contacting the National Cancer Screening Register on 1800 627 701 or at www.ncsr.gov.au/boweltest. Have your participant number or Medicare number ready.

*Figures as per 2025 Cancer in Australia Report.



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What if I don't understand the instructions on the kit?

If you are unsure how to complete the test or have any questions, you can watch a video on how to do the test at www.health.gov.au/nbcsp-kit-video.

You can also get support from:

- Your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker
- Your ACCHS or GP
- The Test Kit Helpline on 1800 930 998

I'm over 74. Why can't I screen with the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program?

The upper age of 74 is based on current evidence on the harms and benefits of population screening and is in keeping with the recommendations of the *Clinical Guidelines for the Prevention, Early Detection and Management of Colorectal Cancer*. Bowel screening kits covered by Medicare are available from GPs for people of any age.

Non-Program bowel screening test kits are also available to purchase at most pharmacies or online for a small cost. Should you have concerns about bowel cancer and bowel habits, we encourage you to discuss your circumstances with your GP or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker as they are best placed to provide advice based on your medical history.

Access and Support

What if I live in a remote community and have trouble with mail delivery?

If you don't get mail regularly:

- Contact your local ACCHS to get a kit directly
- Ask your GP during a health check
- Call the National Cancer Screening Register on 1800 627 701

Can someone help me understand the test instructions?

Yes! You can get help from:

- Your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker
- Your ACCHS or GP
- The Test Kit Helpline on 1800 930 998

What if I feel shame or embarrassment about the test?

It's normal to feel that way. Remember, the test is private, done at home, and helps you stay strong for your mob. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers understand and will support you in a culturally safe way.



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Can I talk to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker about my test result?

Yes. Your local ACCHS or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker can:

- Help explain your result
- Support you if further tests are needed
- Provide culturally appropriate care throughout the process
- Connect you with other support services if needed

Will my information be kept private and used respectfully?

Yes. Your health information is private and confidential. The program follows strict privacy laws. Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services are governed by your community and are committed to culturally safe, respectful care.

For more on how the program uses your information, go to www.ncsr.gov.au/about-us/privacy-policy.

Who else can I contact for support?

- National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO): www.naccho.org.au
- Cancer Council Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Support Line: 13 11 20
- Your state or territory Aboriginal health organisation
- Local Aboriginal Medical Service or ACCHS

REMEMBER Screening helps keep you strong –
for yourself, your family, and your community.

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