

Faecal Occult Blood Test

A test for the early signs of bowel cancer



A faecal occult blood test (FOBT) is a simple test that looks for the early signs of bowel cancer. The test can be done at home and involves taking samples from two separate bowel motions (faeces) using a test kit. The samples are then sent to a laboratory for testing.

FOBTs look for tiny amounts of blood in a bowel motion. This blood often can't be seen by the naked eye. Blood is usually caused by something less serious than cancer. However, it may be a sign of an early bowel cancer or a polyp: a growth on the inside of the bowel that could develop into cancer. If the FOBT finds blood, further tests are needed to find out what has caused the bleeding.

Who should do an FOBT?

People aged over 50, without symptoms and without a strong family history of bowel cancer, are encouraged to do an FOBT every two years.

People with a strong family history of bowel cancer or any symptoms should see a doctor.

What are the symptoms of bowel cancer?

Although many bowel cancers grow without symptoms, there are a few things to look out for.

Symptoms can include:

- bleeding from your back passage or any sign of blood after a bowel motion
- an unexplained and persistent change in bowel habits: for example, looser bowel motions, severe constipation, and/or needing to go to the toilet more than usual
- unexplained tiredness
- lower abdominal pain or a persistent feeling of fullness.

What is a strong family history?

If you have a close relative (parent, brother, sister or child) who developed bowel cancer under the age of 50, or if more than one relative on the same side of your family has had bowel cancer, you are considered to have a strong family history of bowel cancer. It is important that you speak to your doctor if you think you have a strong family history of bowel cancer.

Whatever your age, if you currently have symptoms or a strong family history of bowel cancer, we recommend you contact your family doctor.

How can I get an FOBT and how much will it cost?

1. If you are turning 50, 55 or 65 between 1 July 2008 and December 2010, the Australian Government will send you a free FOBT as part of the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program. Visit www.cancerscreening.gov.au for more information.
2. You can ask your doctor for an FOBT. Expect to pay around \$30 plus the cost of a consultation. If you are over 50 years, you can order an FOBT online from Cancer Council Victoria by going to www.cancervic.org.au/boweltest. FOBTs are \$28 or \$20 for pensioners and Health Care Card holders.

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Why are the samples collected on different days?

Having two samples checked, rather than just one, means any problem is more likely to be found.

How accurate are FOBTs?

Although no screening test is 100% accurate, the FOBT is currently the most widely available and well trialled screening test for bowel cancer. Having the FOBT every two years, can reduce the risk of dying from bowel cancer by up to one-third.

How often should I do an FOBT?

FOBTs are recommended every two years because bowel cancer is usually slow growing. In the meantime, see your doctor if you notice any sign of blood in your bowel motions or have any symptoms of bowel cancer.

What do the test results mean?

Negative (no blood found)

Negative FOBTs do not mean that you do not have or can never develop bowel cancer, since some bowel cancers may not bleed, or may only bleed every now and then. Those with a negative result should test again in two years time.

Positive (blood found)

There could be several reasons for finding blood in a bowel motion that may not be related to bowel cancer, for example, bleeding from piles, menstrual blood, etc.

If blood is found, it is important to speak to your doctor about follow-up tests, such as a colonoscopy, to check for bowel cancer, polyps or other causes.

Remember, bowel cancer is 90% curable if found at an early stage.

What is a colonoscopy?

A colonoscopy is a test that allows a specialist to look at the inside of the bowel. The test itself takes 20 to 30 minutes and is usually done in a hospital or day clinic.

The day before the colonoscopy you will be asked to drink a special preparation to help empty the bowel. On the day of the procedure you may be given medicine that will make you feel drowsy. Please note, you will not be able to drive home.

The specialist will insert a narrow, flexible tube into your back passage. This tube is called a colonoscope. It allows the specialist to look for polyps or bowel cancers. Most polyps can be removed during the colonoscopy.

If you need to have a colonoscopy your doctor will explain the procedure and tell you about any risks. It is rare for a colonoscopy to cause serious problems.

How much does a colonoscopy cost?

The costs will vary depending on whether you have the colonoscopy as a public or private patient. Public hospital patients are not charged. The cost for private patients will depend on their level of private health cover, and any additional fees charged.

How long will I have to wait for a colonoscopy?

Public hospital patients often have to wait several weeks, or sometimes months for the procedure. Private patients usually have a shorter wait.

For more information contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

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