

Bowel cancer - a deadly reality

The Health Column

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Bowel cancer is the third most common type of newly diagnosed cancer in Australia affecting both men and women almost equally. It is Australia's second biggest cancer killer after lung cancer. Australia also has the unenviable record of one of the highest rates of bowel cancer in the world.

14,962 Australians are told they have bowel cancer each year, which includes 1,313 people under 50 years of age. The risk of bowel cancer increases sharply from 50 years of age. 4,071 Australian die every year from bowel cancer.

The good news is that bowel cancer is one of the most curable types of cancer if detected early and, if caught in time, 90% of bowel cancer cases can be treated successfully.



Bowel Cancer Awareness Month is an annual initiative of Bowel Cancer Australia, and is run throughout the month of June. A highlight of Bowel Cancer Awareness Month is Red Apple Day, which this year is on Wednesday 21 June 2017. On this day Australians are encouraged to support the vital work of Bowel Cancer Australia through the purchase of a Bowel Cancer Awareness Ribbon and apple themed fundraising activities.

The apple logo used by Bowel Cancer Australia is a symbolic representation of the charity's bowel cancer message. A small hole in an apple is caused by a worm but if detected early and removed, the worm is unable to continue affecting the apple. The message is that it's the same with people. If bowel cancer is detected early it can be treated successfully and people can continue to enjoy life.

However, at the moment fewer than 40% of bowel cancers are detected early so we need to start acting early and be aware of the symptoms earlier. If bowel cancer is detected before it has spread beyond the bowel, the chance of surviving for at least five years after diagnosis is 90%. Sadly, many cases are not detected until a later stage and so, overall, the chance of surviving at least 5 years for bowel cancer patients is 68%. The fact is that early detection offers the best hope of reducing the number of Australians who die each year from bowel cancer.

The risk of developing bowel cancer is greater if you:

- are aged 50 years and over;

- have a history of inflammatory bowel disease, such as Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis;
- have previously had special types of polyps, called adenomas, in the bowel; or
- have a significant family history of bowel cancer or polyps.

The definition of 'significant family history' is important. You are considered to have a significant family history of bowel cancer if a close relative (parent, brother, sister or child) developed bowel cancer at a young age (under 50 years) or if more than one relative on the same side of your family has had bowel cancer.

Most bowel cancers develop from non-cancerous growths called 'polyps'. Not all polyps become cancerous and if they are removed the risk of bowel cancer is reduced. The development of bowel cancer generally takes many years, and usually begins in the lining of the colon or rectum. If the cancer isn't treated, the cancer can grow through the wall of the bowel and spread to the lymph nodes and to other parts of the body.

It is important to speak to a health professional about any concerns you may have.

Your local community pharmacy is your health destination and your pharmacist can give you more information about issues affecting your bowel. Your pharmacist can also advise you about bowel cancer screening test kits which are designed for people who do not have any obvious symptoms of the disease. The aim is to find any polyps or to find cancer early when they are easier to treat and cure. The BowelScreen Australia test kits come complete with full instructions, a dedicated customer helpline, as well as a reminder service.

Your Self Care pharmacy has a range of Self Care Fact Cards including one titled *Fibre and bowel health*. Other Fact Cards may also be relevant and helpful depending on your individual situation – ask your pharmacist.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au/selfcare, then click 'Find a *Self Care Pharmacy* near you'.