

What questions might your GP ask you?

Your GP should take a history of your symptoms and ask about your general health:

When did you first notice the symptoms?

Tell your GP, as precisely as possible, when your symptoms started and whether they have been persistent or coming and going regularly.

Have there been any changes in your diet or lifestyle? Are you taking any new medication?

All of these things can have an effect on your bowel habit and should be mentioned to your doctor.

Have you noticed any bleeding from your bottom? Do your stools (poo) look any different to normal?

It is particularly important to tell your GP if you have streaks of bright red blood, with or without mucus, or very dark coloured stools.

How often are you going to the toilet now? Has this changed from your normal pattern?

Change in your normal bowel habit is a very important symptom. People with several weeks' history of changes may need further investigation.

Have you noticed any other symptoms that are unusual?

If you have other symptoms, such as weight loss or unexplained tiredness, you may not have connected them to your bowel condition, but they might be important.

Does bowel cancer run in your family?

Very rarely, bowel cancer may appear to run in families, affecting younger people (under the age of 50). If there are several cases of bowel or other cancers in your family, please tell your GP.

Your GP should then examine your abdomen and do a rectal examination (a quick, internal check with a gloved finger) in order to feel for anything unusual in your back passage. He / she may also want to do a blood test to check for anaemia.

If your GP does not refer you right away for further tests or investigations, do agree a time frame to go back if your symptoms don't settle down after any treatment they prescribe. Most people referred will not have bowel cancer, but the earlier you find this out, the better.

Further information

Please visit our website for comprehensive advice about symptoms, screening and treatment of bowel cancer: www.beatingbowelcancer.org

Beating Bowel Cancer works to support all those affected by bowel cancer, as well as improving awareness of the condition and promoting early diagnosis. The charity helps people by providing emotional and practical support to anyone affected by the condition.

If you have any questions or comments about this publication, or would like information on the evidence used to produce it, please write to us or email info@beatingbowelcancer.org.



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT
BOWEL CANCER



Certified member

This organisation has been certified as a producer of reliable health and social care information.

www.theinformationstandard.org



don't sit on your symptoms

Don't sit on your symptoms

There are many common conditions that can affect the health of our bottoms and bowels. Many cause symptoms similar to those of bowel cancer so it is important to get checked out by your doctor. Don't be embarrassed and don't put it off. If you notice any changes that are unusual, or that don't seem to be getting better on their own, your GP will want to see you.

What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer can affect any part of the colon or rectum. Bowel cancer usually starts as slow growing polyps attached to the inside of the bowel wall. Some polyps can start to change and become abnormal over time. If left untreated, they gradually increase in size and may become cancerous. Bowel cancer diagnosed at an early stage can be treated very successfully in around 90% of cases.



How common is bowel cancer?

- Bowel cancer is the UK's second biggest cancer killer.
- Bowel cancer will affect 1 in 20 women and 1 in 16 men in the UK, with around 41,000 new cases diagnosed every year.
- Most bowel cancer cases are diagnosed in those aged over 60, although the number of younger people being diagnosed is increasing.

What are the symptoms of bowel cancer?

If you have any of the higher risk symptoms listed below, it is usually quite safe to watch and wait for up to three weeks. But if they persist for longer than this you should get advice from your GP.

- **Bleeding from the bottom or blood in your poo.** Unexplained bleeding, poo streaked with blood or mucus, or dark sticky poo.
- **A persistent change in bowel habit** especially if you are going to the toilet more often or experiencing unexplained looser stools. Symptoms may also include unexpected constipation and a feeling of fullness in your rectum (back passage).
- **Constant, unexplained pain anywhere in the abdomen (tummy).** It may be linked to going to the toilet, or it might come and go like cramps or colic.
- **An unexplained lump in your abdomen** especially if it is on the right hand side.
- **Unexpected weight loss** perhaps due to lack of appetite, or feeling bloated or sick.
- **Unexplained tiredness**, which may be a symptom of anaemia.

Most people with these symptoms DO NOT have bowel cancer, but your GP will want to examine you and may do further tests to rule it out.

What else could it be?

Your symptoms could be caused by other common conditions, which can easily be treated and managed by your GP:

- **Haemorrhoids (piles)** – engorged blood vessels just inside the anus, often accompanied by pain and itching. Piles can cause bright red bleeding from the bottom, and you might be able to feel them with a finger, especially after going to the toilet.
- **Anal fissure** – a tear in the skin around the opening of the anus, often caused by constipation or straining, for example.
- **Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and diverticular disease** – can cause symptoms such as stomach cramps or pain, diarrhoea and/or constipation, and a change in bowel habit. People with these diseases do not have a higher risk of developing bowel cancer.
- **Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis** – common inflammatory bowel diseases with symptoms that include abdominal pain, tiredness, weight loss, bloating, bleeding and mucus. These diseases can also put you more at risk of developing bowel cancer and you should talk to your GP about being monitored regularly.

Please see our website for more information on these diseases.