



By Nicholas Viewers, OSCAR Care Group Dietitian

Bowel Cancer

Bowel cancer, also known as Colorectal cancer, is a type of cancer that forms in the colon or rectum. Currently, bowel cancer is the second most common form of cancer in Australian men and women, with 1 in 12 people developing the disease in their lifetime.

Bowel cancer can affect anyone regardless of age or gender, however there are several factors that can increase or decrease the likelihood of developing the disease.

Who is more at risk?

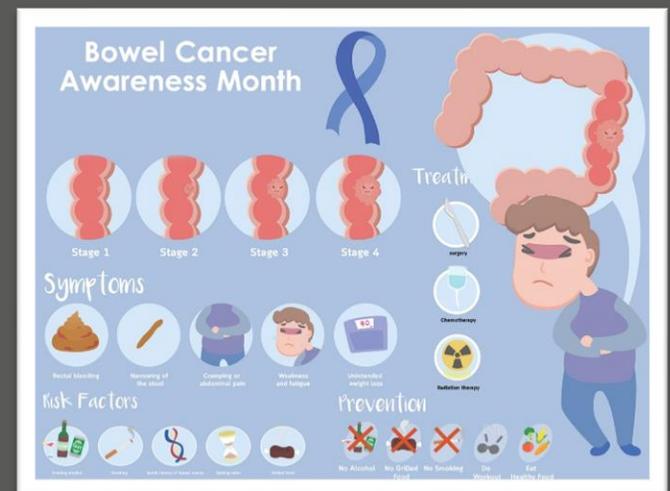
Like many forms of cancer there are both uncontrollable and controllable and risk factors.

Uncontrollable bowel cancer risk factors include:

- Family history of bowel cancer
- Type 2 Diabetes or increased Insulin levels
- History of polyps in bowel (benign growths attached the lining of the bowel)
- History of a previous bowel cancer
- Chronic inflammatory bowel disease (eg. Crohns)

The risk factors we CAN control include:

- High red meat and processed meat consumption
- Being overweight / obese
- High alcohol consumption
- Smoking



What does our bowel do for us?

Before looking at how we can reduce our risk, it is important to know what the bowel is. In the context of bowel cancer, the term bowel is often referring to the large intestine, or colon, which is the final stages of our gastrointestinal tract. After our food passes through our stomach and small intestines, where most of digestion occurs, the food waste passes onto the colon where water is reabsorbed and our solid faeces are formed.

The colon then passes faeces through the rectum and anus and opens into the toilet. Because of this, we can use our bowel motions to identify common bowel cancer warning signs.



Symptoms of Bowel Cancer

- Bleeding after a bowel motion
- Changes to normal bowel habits (eg. constipation / diarrhoea)
- Unintentional and unexplained weight loss and/or loss of appetite
- Abdominal bloating and/or pain
- Symptoms of anaemia – fatigue, weakness or breathlessness

What can I do to reduce my risk?

For most forms of cancer, it is recommended to maintain a healthy weight, stay physically active and follow a healthy diet as per the Australian Dietary Guidelines (found via <https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/>). For bowel cancer specifically, there are a few things to consider.

What should I be eating?

The number one dietary factor to ensure a healthy bowel and reduce the risk of bowel cancer is fibre. It is recommended that Australians consume 25–30g of fibre per day. Fibre is the mostly indigestible parts of plant foods that move through our digestive system relatively unchanged. When fibre enters our colon it is fermented by the friendly bacteria that live there, and this is greatly beneficial to our health.

There are three forms of fibre – soluble fibre, insoluble fibre and resistant starch.

Soluble fibre dissolves in water to form a thick gel that slows down our digestion. This not only keeps us fuller for longer but also acts as a lubricant, ensuring food waste passes through our colon smoothly.

Soluble fibre is found within:

- Oats
- Beans and legumes
- The flesh of fruits and vegetables

Insoluble fibre adds bulk to our faeces as it doesn't fully breakdown. This keeps our bowels regular and acts like a sponge, keeping things clean and healthy. This type of fibre is also very filling which assists in weight management.

Insoluble fibre is found within:

- Wholegrain breads and cereals
- Nuts and seeds
- Lentils, kidney beans and chickpeas
- The outer skin of fruits and vegetables

Resistant starch resists digestion in the small intestine and is fermented by the bacteria in the colon. This process produces compounds called short chain fatty acids (SCFA). It is these SCFA's that keep the lining of the bowel healthy and are believed to lower the risk of bowel cancer by promoting the death of colorectal cancer cells. Resistant starch is found in:

- Whole grains (eg. wholegrain bread, wholegrain cereals and brown rice)
- Pastas (al-dente)
- Legumes (eg. baked beans)
- Cold cooked potatoes
- Firm bananas



What foods should I avoid?

When it comes to bowel cancer there is substantial evidence around foods to avoid, as well as foods to monitor. Like most things in life it all comes down to moderation. Occasional consumption of the following foods is not likely to cause long term harm. Regular consumption, however, may increase your risk of developing bowel cancer.

Processed Meat

Processed meats are classified as a group 1 carcinogen by the World Health Organisation (WHO) meaning that there is strong scientific evidence that they cause cancer. When meats are processed, they have added nitrates and nitrites which are broken down into harmful chemicals in the bowel. Processed meats include salami, bacon, frankfurt, and polony.



Red Meat

Red meat can be included in a healthy diet, however there are associations with high intakes of red meat and bowel cancer. This is due to naturally occurring chemicals in red meat that damage the lining of the bowel when broken down. The cancer council recommends no more than 455g cooked (700g raw) red meat per week. This can be over 2-3 meals or spread out over the week.

Alcohol

Drinking alcohol increases your risks of developing many forms of cancer, including bowel cancer. The risk is even higher for those who smoke as well as drink alcohol. It is recommended to consume no more than 2 standard drinks per day and include at least 2 alcohol free days per week.

What more can I do?

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including adequate fibre and limiting processed meats, red meats and alcohol are fantastic ways to reduce your risks of developing colon cancer. It is also recommended that anyone above 50 years old do a Faecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT) to detect bowel cancer in its early stages. The Australian government currently provides free FOBT every two years to Australians over the age of 50. Fortunately, 90% of bowel cancer cases are cured if detected early.



June is Bowel Cancer Awareness Month

Further information available from:
www.bowelcanceraustralia.org



Need to establish a plan to improve a resident's health & dietary needs?

This article was written by OSCAR Care Group Dietitian, Nicholas Vievers. Please call or email our Dietitians via our contact details below.

References:

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- <https://www.cancer.org.au/about-cancer/early-detection/screening-programs/bowel-cancer-screening/>
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