

# MEDIA RELEASE



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## **What you don't know can kill you**

A new Cancer Council study shows dangerous levels of ignorance among those at risk from bowel cancer.

The research reveals that 24 per cent of people aged between 50 and 75 can not name a single sign or symptom of bowel cancer and 35 per cent have never heard of the potentially life-saving bowel cancer screening test faecal occult blood test (FOBT).

National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines recommend FOBT screening at least every two years for everyone over 50. However, of those surveyed aged 50 to 75 who had heard of an FOBT (65 per cent), less than a quarter (22 per cent) reported their doctor had mentioned it to them.

Cancer Council Tasmania Clinical Liaison Officer Dr Rob Brodribb says bowel cancer kills three Tasmanians a week and affects both men and women.

"Nearly all bowel cancer cases can be cured if found early enough, yet this Cancer Council Victoria research shows a worrying level of ignorance about symptoms and prevention among those most at risk," Dr Brodribb says.

"GPs are perfectly placed to educate their patients about bowel cancer, including what it is, what the symptoms are and how it can be prevented through screening and a healthy lifestyle," he says.

However, this research reveals an alarming number of GPs are not broaching the topic with patients at risk.

"As the second leading cause of cancer deaths, bowel cancer is an important public health issue and clearly, vital health messages are not getting through.

"However, education should not be left solely to GPs. The government and health organisations clearly have a role to play in increasing public awareness of bowel cancer and promoting the benefits of early detection.

"Greater knowledge and understanding will help to de-stigmatise bowel cancer and drive public acceptance of the national bowel cancer screening program, which could save 30 lives a week Australia-wide when fully rolled out," Dr Brodribb says.

**For comment please call Rob Brodribb on 0408 127 499  
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## Background

### About the research

The Cancer Issues Population Survey is a biennial survey conducted by the Centre for Behaviour Research in Cancer. In 2007, 1359 participants aged between 45 and 75 years were asked questionnaire items on bowel cancer.

### Key findings

- While the majority of participants (73%) were able to report at least one valid sign or symptom of bowel cancer, 25% indicated they did not know the signs or symptoms of bowel cancer.
- Over 60% of the sample identified bleeding/blood or mucus in a bowel motion as a sign or symptom of bowel cancer. Just under a third (32%) described diarrhoea or constipation, and just over a quarter (26%) described pain in general, abdominal pain or cramping as a sign or symptom of bowel cancer.
- Overall, 65% of participants reported that they had previously heard of an FOBT.
- Of the participants aged 50 to 75 years who had heard of an FOBT, 22% reported that their doctor had mentioned the test to them.
- A third (33%) of the sample aged 50 to 75 years who had heard of FOBT said that they had used the test.
- All participants were asked how 'likely' or 'unlikely' they would be to participate in the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program. The majority (69%) of those aged 50 to 75 years said that they would be 'very likely' or 'likely' to participate in the Program.

### Bowel cancer symptoms

Bowel cancer symptoms may include:

- Blood after a bowel motion
- An unexplained and persistent change in bowel actions. For example, looser or more frequent bowel motions or becoming severely constipated
- Unexplained tiredness
- Lower abdominal pain or a persistent feeling of fullness.