

Bowel cancer

What is bowel cancer?

The bowel is part of the digestive tract. It has two major functions:

finishes digesting food by absorbing water and nutrients
gets rid of remaining wastes.

The bowel has three main parts:

- small bowel -- mainly absorbs nutrients from broken-down food
- colon -- mainly absorbs water
- rectum -- stores waste materials (faeces) until they are passed from the body through the back passage (anus).

The colon and rectum together are known as the large bowel.

Bowel cancer generally refers to cancer of the colon or rectum. Cancer of the small bowel is rare.

Bowel cancer is also known as colorectal cancer.

How common is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is a major problem in Australia. Apart from skin cancer, it is the most common cancer affecting both men and women.

About 10,600 people are diagnosed with bowel cancer each year. It is becoming a little more common, especially in men.

About one in 18 men and one in 26 women will develop bowel cancer before the age of 75.

The older you are, the greater your chance of developing bowel cancer - it affects mainly people over 50 but can occur at any age.

Some people who develop bowel cancer inherit faulty genes from their parents but, for most people, age and diet contribute to developing bowel cancer.

For more detailed information consult the booklet *Understanding bowel cancer* on www.cancertas.org.au/pages/healthprof_patient.php

Call The Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20