

Diagnosing Bowel Cancer

A Quick Guide

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This is a brief summary of the information on 'About bowel cancer' from our website. You will find more detailed information on the website. In this information there are sections on

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You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

Bowel cancer tests

Usually you begin by seeing your GP, who will ask you about your general health, examine you and do some blood tests. They may examine your back passage (rectum). Your doctor may then refer you to hospital for any further tests or X-rays.

At the hospital

A bowel cancer specialist will ask about your medical history and your symptoms. The doctor or a specialist nurse can use a tube to look inside the rectum (proctoscopy) or the lower part of the large bowel (sigmoidoscopy). You usually have this done in the outpatient department. To have a sigmoidoscopy, you must have an empty lower bowel. You are usually given a small enema or strong laxatives beforehand to clear the bowel out.

If you have any abnormal areas, the doctor or nurse can take samples (biopsies). If you have any outgrowths of the bowel lining (polyps), the doctor or nurse will remove them and send them away to be examined under a microscope.

Your doctor may advise you to have a colonoscopy. A colonoscopy looks at the whole of the inside of the large bowel. It is done in the outpatient department and takes about an hour. For this test the bowel has to be empty. You will probably have medicine to make you drowsy just before the test. Your doctor or nurse will ask you to lie on your side and will pass a flexible tube into your rectum and up into your bowel. They can take photographs and biopsies of the bowel lining during the test.

Your doctor may arrange for you to have a barium enema, which shows an outline of the bowel using X-rays.

Further tests for bowel cancer

If tests show that there is a cancer in the large bowel, you may need further tests to find out more about the cancer and whether it has spread.

CT scan

This type of scan takes a series of X-ray pictures of the body from different angles. The pictures are fed into a computer and form a detailed picture of the inside of your body.

MRI scan

This scan uses powerful magnets to build up a picture. An MRI scan can sometimes give more detail than CT scans for rectal cancers.

Ultrasound scan of the back passage

This is a type of ultrasound scan which is used to find out more about rectal cancer. The doctor or technician puts an ultrasound probe inside the rectum. This can be uncomfortable but the scan only takes a few minutes at most.

Other tests

Your doctor may also want you to have an ultrasound scan of the abdomen, a chest X-ray, blood tests or a PET scan.

What to ask your doctor about bowel cancer tests

- What tests are you going to do?
- What are you looking for?
- Will the tests show whether I have cancer?
- How reliable are the tests?
- Do I have to do anything to prepare for any of the tests?
- Are the tests painful?
- Do any of the tests have after effects?
- Can I have all the tests as an outpatient?
- Can I bring someone with me when I have the tests?
- How long will it take to get the results of the tests?

For more information, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/cancerhelp>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

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