

Bowel cancer

If bowel cancer is found and treated early, you have a good chance of getting better.

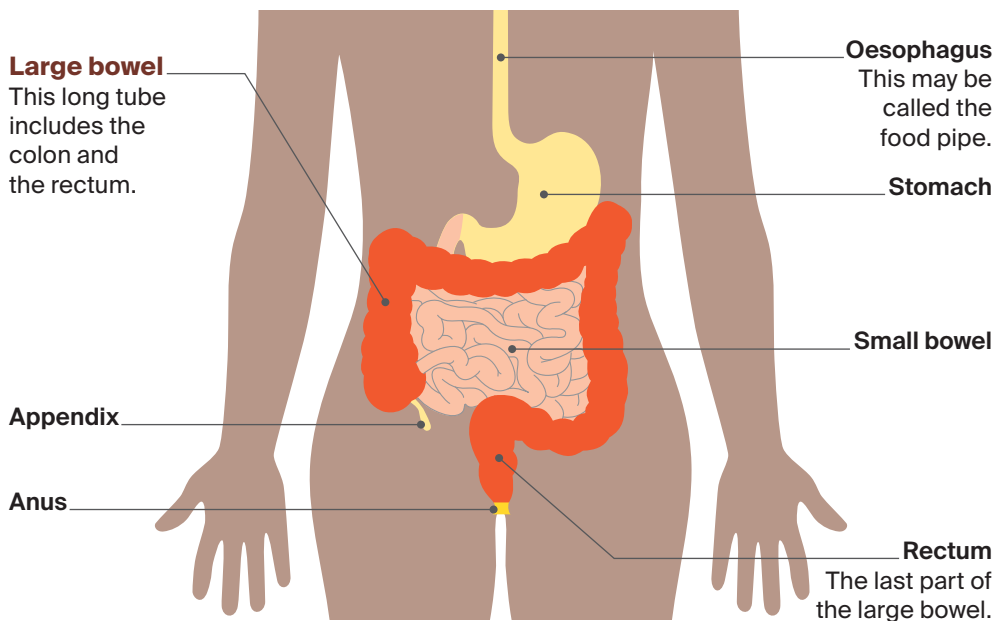
What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is cancer that starts in any part of the large bowel (the colon or the rectum). It may be called colorectal cancer. It can happen when some of the cells in the bowel do not work properly and develop into a growth (called a polyp). These growths are usually harmless, but sometimes they turn into bowel cancer.

The bowel and the digestive system

The bowel is part of the digestive system – the part of the body that turns the food that you eat into energy.

When you eat, the food goes from your mouth down a pipe called the oesophagus and into the stomach. The food then travels into the small bowel, then into the large bowel. Along the way, your body turns the food into energy. Anything left over turns into poo and comes out of the body through the anus.



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If you are uncomfortable about having any tests, you can ask a nurse, Aboriginal health worker or someone from your family or mob to be in the room with you.

What are the signs and symptoms of bowel cancer?

You can have bowel cancer without noticing anything is wrong. Or you might notice some warning signs like:

- blood or mucus (a slippery substance) in your poo
- hard poos that are difficult to pass (constipation) or watery poos (diarrhoea)
- tummy problems, like pain, cramps or feeling bloated
- feeling tired all the time.

These signs do not always mean you have bowel cancer, but it's important to see your doctor if you notice any of these symptoms. Your doctor will do some tests to work out if you have cancer or what the problem is.

What tests will I have?

Some of the tests you may have include a:

- **Physical examination** – Your doctor will feel your tummy and may check your rectum and anus.
- **Blood test** – Some blood will be taken from a vein in your arm and sent to a lab for testing.
- **Poo test** – Some of your poo will be sent to a lab to check if it has blood in it.
- **Colonoscopy** – The doctor will put a tube with a camera on the end into your anus. This helps the doctor to see inside the bowel. Before this is done, you will have medicine to make you feel sleepy (light sedative or anaesthetic).

You might also have some scans to check other parts of your body.

What do the test results mean?

The tests will tell the doctor if you have bowel cancer, what type it is, and if the cancer has spread (called the stage).

Bowel cancer is divided into 4 stages:

- **early cancer** – stage 1, stage 2 and stage 3
- **advanced cancer** – stage 4.

Knowing the stage of the cancer helps the doctors work out the best treatment for you.

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It's important to go to all of your treatment sessions. If you miss a session, it might become harder to treat the cancer.

What treatment will I need for bowel cancer?

There are different types of treatment for bowel cancer. You may have one or more of these treatments:

Surgery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This removes the part of the bowel with cancer.
Radiation therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This may be used before surgery to shrink the cancer, and some people may have it after surgery to kill cancer cells that remain in the area. • Some people have radiation therapy to relieve pain and other problems caused by the cancer.
Chemotherapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes called “chemo”, chemotherapy is strong medicine that can kill the cancer cells.
Other medicines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special types of drugs called targeted therapy or immunotherapy may be used to treat advanced bowel cancer.

How will the treatment affect me?

Your insides need to recover after treatment for bowel cancer and some people may need a stoma. This is a small hole in the tummy that is made during surgery. Poo can leave the body through this hole and go into a bag (called a stoma bag). You then empty the stoma bag into the toilet.

Usually, you need to have a stoma for 3–12 months, and you will then have surgery to close the hole. About 1 in 10 people with bowel cancer need a permanent stoma. A nurse or an Aboriginal health worker will teach you how to take care of the stoma and support you as you get used to it.

Treatment for bowel cancer can change the way your bowels work for a while. If you are having trouble with pooing or are passing wind too often, yarn with your doctor, nurse, Aboriginal health worker or dietitian. They may suggest some changes to the foods you eat or other ways to help.

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How do I cope with the cancer?

• **Yarn with mob**

It's normal for you and your family to have lots of different feelings right now. You might find it helpful to yarn with family, mob or Elders about coping at this time.

• **Ask questions**

You may have many questions about the cancer, its treatment and how it will affect you. Your doctor, nurse or Aboriginal health worker will help answer any questions you may have.

• **Get help with travel**

If you have to travel a long way for treatment, you can get help to pay for travel and somewhere to stay. For more information, call 13 11 20.

• **Find support**

Call 13 11 20 if you need support.

More information

• **Cancer Council**

13 11 20
Visit aboriginal.cancercouncil.com.au

• **Menzies School of Health Research**

Visit menzies.edu.au/cancer

This information was adapted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by Menzies School of Health Research in consultation with a clinical advisory group and an Indigenous consultation group. Cancer Council NSW has updated this fact sheet in consultation with cancer experts and Aboriginal people with an experience of cancer.

This fact sheet features design elements from Cancer Council NSW's respect symbol, which was designed by Marcus Lee. Marcus was born and raised in Darwin, Northern Territory, and is a descendant of the Karajarri people. The Cancer Council Australia respect symbol (below) was designed by Riki Salam as part of his *Journey of Hope* artwork. Riki was born and raised in Cairns, Queensland, on Yidindji land, and has connections to Muralag, Kala Lagaw Ya, Meriam Mer and Kuku Yalanji peoples on his father's side and the Ngai Tahu people of New Zealand on his mother's side.



Cancer Council acknowledges Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past, present and emerging.

**Call 13 11 20
if you need
support.**