

# Press release: Men and women asked not to miss out on bowel screening

PHE is calling on all men and women, aged over 60, to get screened for bowel cancer after the latest figures show over 40% are not getting tested – with embarrassment over providing a stool sample one of the reasons, among men in particular, that is putting thousands unnecessarily at risk of dying.

PHE wants wives, partners and daughters to encourage the older men in the family – as well as the women – to overcome any embarrassment and ensure they send in a sample to be tested.

A new PHE report today (24 November 2017), [Screening Programmes in England 2016 to 2017](#), shows that despite a 3% increase on the previous year, the take-up for bowel cancer screening (59%) is still significantly lower compared to other cancer screening programmes – breast screening (76%) and cervical screening (72%).

Bowel cancer screening is offered to all men and women aged 60 to 74, who are sent a home test kit to provide stool samples.

There were over 3,000 bowel cancers diagnosed as a result of screening in 2016 to 2017. In over 90% of these cases, cancers were found at an early stage, where treatment is more likely to be successful.

Bowel cancer is the fourth most common cancer in England, but the second leading cause of cancer deaths, with around 13,000 people dying from it every year.

If detected early, bowel cancer is very treatable which is why screening is vital and it has been shown to reduce the risk of dying from bowel cancer by 16%. Thousands more lives could be saved if more people, particularly men, returned their stool samples to be tested.

Improvements are being made to make screening easier and next year there will be a new home test, the faecal immunochemical test (FIT), which requires just 1 sample rather than the current 3, and will detect bowel cancer more accurately.

In addition to the home test, a one-off test called bowel scope screening is offered to men and women at the age of 55.

Professor Anne Mackie, PHE's director of screening, said:

It's of great concern that 4 out of every 10 over 60 year olds are not taking up the offer of getting tested for bowel cancer. Men in particular are less likely to send in a sample, so we're asking their partners, children and grandchildren to encourage them to do so.

Bowel cancer causes 13,000 deaths every year, which is why screening is so important. Embarrassment over giving a stool sample may be causing thousands of preventable deaths. But with a new home test kit next year making it much easier to get screened, we are hoping to see numbers increase.

Judith Brodie, Interim Chief Executive at Beating Bowel Cancer, said:

People may feel uncomfortable completing their home screening tests, but they can be crucial in the early diagnosis of bowel cancer – which is very treatable if caught early. We strongly encourage the use of these bowel screening tests – they can be life-saving.

PHE is committed to improving bowel cancer screening attendance and has a programme of work which includes:

- providing local services with clearer information to encourage better screening take-up
- encouraging GPs to endorse screening invitation letters

The Bowel Cancer Screening Programme, recommended by the UK National Screening Committee, began in 2006 and the expert Committee has reviewed the evidence every 3 years. The Committee recommends the programme as it shows clear benefits and saves lives. Screening remains a choice, based on a person's individual circumstances.

## **Background**

1. The risk of bowel cancer increases with age, with over 80% of bowel cancers arising in people who are 60 or over.
2. Bowel scope screening, also known as flexible sigmoidoscopy, is a one-off test offered to men and women at the age of 55. It is normally used as a routine outpatient appointment procedure to examine the inner lining of the lower large intestine – the part where most cancers are found. It can also be used to evaluate gastrointestinal symptoms, such as abdominal pain, rectal bleeding, or changes in bowel habit.
3. The NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme offers screening every 2 years to all men and women aged 60 to 74. People in the invitation age range are automatically sent an invitation, then their screening kit, so they can do the test at home. Those over the invitation age range can ask for a screening kit every 2 years by calling a Freephone number – 0800 707 60 60.

4. PHE is currently working with NHS England on the introduction of a new home test kit, the Faecal Immunochemical Test (FIT), which can quantify the amount of blood found in a stool sample. It has a number of potential advantages over the current test, faecal occult blood (FOB), as it is more accurate and more acceptable to use.
5. Anyone with any symptoms, such as a persistent change in bowel habit or bleeding from the back passage, or who has concerns about their bowel health, should speak to their GP, who can arrange for a referral with a specialist, if necessary.
6. For more information about the bowel cancer screening programme, [visit NHS Choices](#)
7. [Public Health England](#) exists to protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities. We do this through world-leading science, knowledge and intelligence, advocacy, partnerships and providing specialist public health services. We are an executive agency of the Department of Health, and are a distinct organisation with operational autonomy to advise and support government, local authorities and the NHS in a professionally independent manner.

## **PHE press office**

Email

[julia.thompson@phe.gov.uk](mailto:julia.thompson@phe.gov.uk)

Telephone

020 7654 8120