

Faecal occult blood tests

Tests for the early signs of bowel cancer

An FOBT is a simple test for the early signs of bowel cancer that can be done at home. It involves taking samples from two or three bowel motions (faeces) using a test kit. The samples are then sent to a laboratory for testing.

FOBTs look for tiny amounts of blood in a bowel motion. Blood is usually caused by something less serious than cancer. However, it may be a sign of an early bowel cancer or a polyp: a growth on the inside of the bowel that could develop into cancer. If the FOBT finds blood, further tests are needed to find out what has caused the bleeding.

Who should do an FOBT?

People aged over fifty, without symptoms and without a strong family history of bowel cancer, are encouraged to do an FOBT every two years.

What are the symptoms of bowel cancer?

Although many bowel cancers grow without symptoms, there are a few things to look out for. Symptoms can include:

- bleeding from your back passage or any sign of blood after a bowel motion
- an unexplained and persistent change in bowel habits. For example, looser bowel motions, severe constipation, and/or needing to go to the toilet more than usual
- unexplained tiredness
- lower abdominal pain or a persistent feeling of fullness.

If you have one of these symptoms see your doctor. Do not do an FOBT.

Where can I get an FOBT?

We recommend that you visit your doctor if you want an FOBT because they will be able to organise any follow-up tests that may be needed.

What does an FOBT cost?

Currently the FOBT screening test is not Medicare rebatable. If you ask for an FOBT from your doctor, expect to pay around to \$30 plus the cost of a doctor's consultation. If the FOBT is positive (which means blood is found in the bowel motion), another doctor's consultation and follow-up tests may be needed. Medicare rebates apply to follow-up tests. Discuss costs with your doctor.

What types of FOBT are available?

There are several different types of tests available, all of which involve collecting tiny samples from bowel motions. There are two main kinds of tests. 'Guaiac' tests require people to change their diets and stop taking some kinds of medication before the test. However, with 'immunochemical' tests, there is no need to change diets or medication.

Sponsored by



Cancer Council

Faecal occult blood tests

Tests for the early signs of bowel cancer

**Cancer
Council
Helpline
13 11 20**
www.
cancervic.
org.au

Why are the samples collected on different days?

Having two or three samples checked, rather than just one, means any problem is more likely to be found.

If the FOBT is negative (no blood found) does it mean that I don't have bowel cancer?

Negative FOBTs do not mean that you do not have, or can never develop, bowel cancer, since some bowel cancers only bleed every now and then. If no blood is found you should do the test again in two years. In the meantime, see your doctor if you notice any sign of blood or symptoms of bowel cancer.

If the FOBT is positive (blood found) does that mean I have bowel cancer?

There could be several reasons for finding blood in a bowel motion that may not be related to bowel cancer, for example, bleeding from piles, menstrual blood, etc. If blood is found, it is important to speak to your doctor about follow-up tests to check for early bowel cancer or polyps. Remember, bowel cancer is highly (90%) curable if found at an early stage.

How accurate are FOBTs?

No test is 100% accurate. Under ideal conditions, an FOBT may detect blood from 80% to 90% of bowel cancers.

My doctor told me I need to have a colonoscopy. What this will involve?

A colonoscopy is a test that allows a specialist to look at the inside of the bowel. It is a day procedure. The test itself takes twenty to thirty minutes and is usually done in a hospital or day clinic.

The day before the colonoscopy you will be asked to drink a special preparation to help empty the bowel. On the day of the procedure you may be given medicine that will make you

feel drowsy. (You will not be able to drive home.) The specialist will insert a narrow, flexible tube into your back passage. This tube is called a colonoscope. It allows the specialist to look for polyps or bowel cancers. Most polyps can be removed during the colonoscopy.

If you need to have a colonoscopy your doctor will explain the procedure and tell you about any risks. It is rare for a colonoscopy to cause serious problems.

How much does a colonoscopy cost?

The costs will vary depending on whether you have the colonoscopy as a public or private patient. Public hospital patients are not charged but they often have to wait many weeks or months for the procedure. For private patients, the full cost of colonoscopy, including the cost of a day bed, theatre fees, etc. is around \$900 to \$1000.

For more information contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 (cost of a local call). This is a confidential service staffed by cancer nurses. Information is available in languages other than English.

August 2007