A Guide for Health Professionals

Yarning with community members about bowel cancer

NACCHO
National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

Bowel Cancer Program

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As a healthcare professional, you may be asked questions by your patients about bowel cancer and bowel cancer screening. This resource has been developed as a tool to refer to and help answer any questions you or community members might have about bowel cancer and bowel cancer screening.

Yarning about bowel cancer screening

Talking about bowel cancer and bowel health can be difficult and something not many people in community talk about.

Encourage community members to:

- talk to a family member
- talk to a healthcare professional at their local ACCHO
- talk to someone in community

Communicating to community members about why bowel cancer awareness is important, reasons might include:

- to stay healthy for family
- learning ways to look after their health to reduce risk of bowel cancer
- being able to talk to other community members

What you need to know about bowel cancer

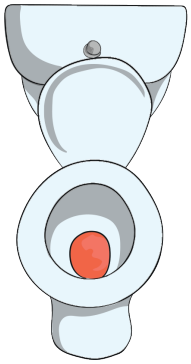
What is the risk of developing bowel cancer?

- 3rd most common cancer impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Higher risk over 50 years
- Treatable cancer if found early, 90% of cases can be successfully treated.

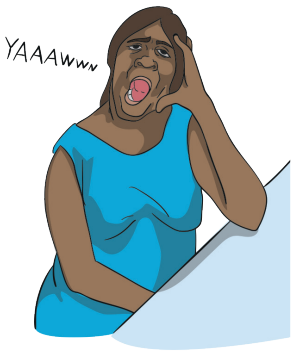
What are the signs of bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer often doesn't show signs or symptoms (in pictures below). It is important community members are aware of some of the changes that could happen to their body.

If your community members have any of these signs, please ensure they talk with their doctor as soon as possible.

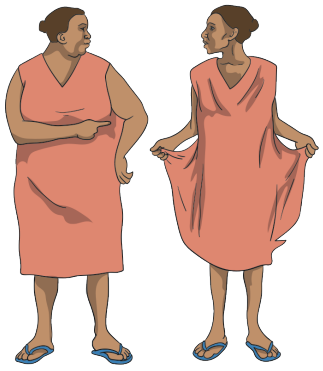


- blood in your poo or in the toilet bowl
- a change in your poo
- severe constipation, and/or if you need to poo more often than usual



feeling tired

stomach pain



weight loss for no reason

What you need to know about bowel cancer screening

How often should community members screen?

Eligible community members between the ages of 45 - 74 are encouraged to screen every two years.

A community member feels fine and doesn't have any signs, should they still screen?

Bowel cancer can develop without any obvious signs. It is important community members are up to date with screening even if they feel healthy. Screening every two years is recommended for people aged between 45 and 74 years old.

A community member has a family history of bowel cancer, should they still screen?

Community members are at a higher risk of bowel cancer if:

- A close relative (parent, brother, sister, or child) developed bowel cancer at a young age (under 55 years); or
- More than one close relative (parent, brother, sister, or child) has had bowel cancer at any age.

If a community member has a family history of bowel cancer, it is important health care professionals provide advice on how best to prevent bowel cancer. More than 75% of people with bowel cancer do not have a family history.

A community member has an existing medical condition, should they screen?

All existing medical conditions should be discussed with a healthcare professional prior to screening for bowel cancer. Healthcare professionals and local medical services are best placed to provide advice to community members about doing the bowel cancer screening test.

It is recommended a community member does not do a bowel cancer test if they have:

- piles (haemorrhoids) which are bleeding.
- blood in the toilet bowl.
- their menstrual period. Wait for 3 days after the period finishes before doing the test.
- had a recent colonoscopy.

Community members may not need to participate in screening if they:

- have had a bowel condition in the last 12 months which is currently under treatment; or
- have had a recent colonoscopy (anytime in the last 2 years with no new clinical changes)

What you need to know about the bowel cancer screening kits

How do eligible community members access a bowel cancer screening kit?

Eligible community members between the age of 45-74 years who have their contact details registered with Medicare may receive a bowel cancer testing kit in the mail every two years.

If a person is over 45 years of age and is yet to receive a bowel cancer testing kit in the mail, they can request a kit directly from a healthcare professional or local medical service.

What if a kit was thrown out/lost/misplaced?

Participating healthcare professionnals or ACCHOs can issue replacement kits directly to eligible participants. A free replacement kit can be requested by contacting the National Cancer Screening Register at www.ncsr.gov.au or calling **1800 627 701**.

What does the bowel cancer screening kit test for?

The immunochemical faecal occult blood test (iFOBT) looks for traces of blood in stool samples which are often invisible. There are several reasons why blood can be found in poo:

- Polyps
- Haemorrhoids
- Inflammation in the bowel

How do I use the kit?

The test is quick and easy and can be completed in just four steps at home:

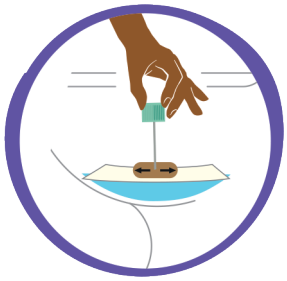
Step 1

Open kit and put toilet liner in the toilet bowl.

Step 2

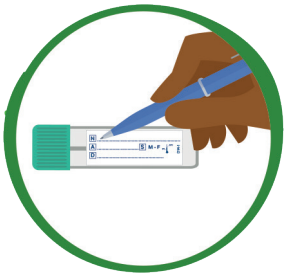
Go to the toilet.

Step 3



Open the tube, swipe the stick through the poo, put the stick back into the sample tube (no need to scoop or touch your poo).

Step 4



Write your details on the sample tube and form. Put everything in the bag/ envelope and post.

If a community member gets stuck, local ACCHO staff can help. Don't forget to remind community members to do the test twice (one sample for two different poos).

What you need to know about test results

What happens after a community member completes the test?

Community members will receive a copy of their test results posted to their address, approximately four weeks after the samples have been sent to the pathology for testing. ACCHOs or healthcare professionals will also be notified of the test results.

What does a positive test mean?

If a test result is positive, this means blood has been detected in a sample. A positive result is not a cancer diagnosis. Bleeding can be caused by many conditions, including polyps, haemorrhoids, or inflammation, and may not necessarily be cancer related. If blood is detected, a community member will likely be referred for a colonoscopy as soon as possible.

What does a negative test result mean?

A negative test result means that no blood was detected in the samples provided. The community member will automatically be invited to test again in two years. If any new symptoms present the community member should be assessed for rescreening.

How accurate are bowel cancer screening tests?

The iFOBT test is a widely available and well trialled test to detect microscopic amounts of blood, which can be a sign of cancer or changes in the bowel that can lead to cancer. The iFOBT is the recommended screening tool by the Clinical Practice Guidelines.

For further information on Clinical Practice Guidelines **visit the cancer council website**.

Other important information to know

Are the bowel cancer test kits temperature sensitive?

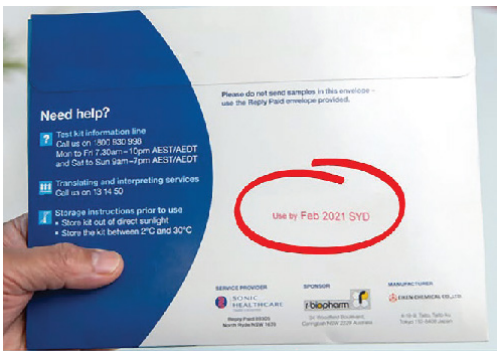
The bowel cancer test kit itself is not sensitive to temperature. However, heat can impact the samples, they need to be kept cool. This is because if there is blood in the samples it can deteriorate if exposed to heat for extended periods of time. When stool samples are exposed to temperatures of 30 degrees or above, the samples may produce an incorrect result.

Organisations, particularly in hot zone areas have successfully supported community members with a range of innovative solutions, such as storing and posting samples in different ways.

For further information on bowel cancer screening please refer to the **Hot Tips for Healthcare Providers** resource.

Do the test kits have an expiry date?

Yes, each kit has an approximate 7-month expiry, this date can be found on the back of the kit envelope.



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Our health in our hands

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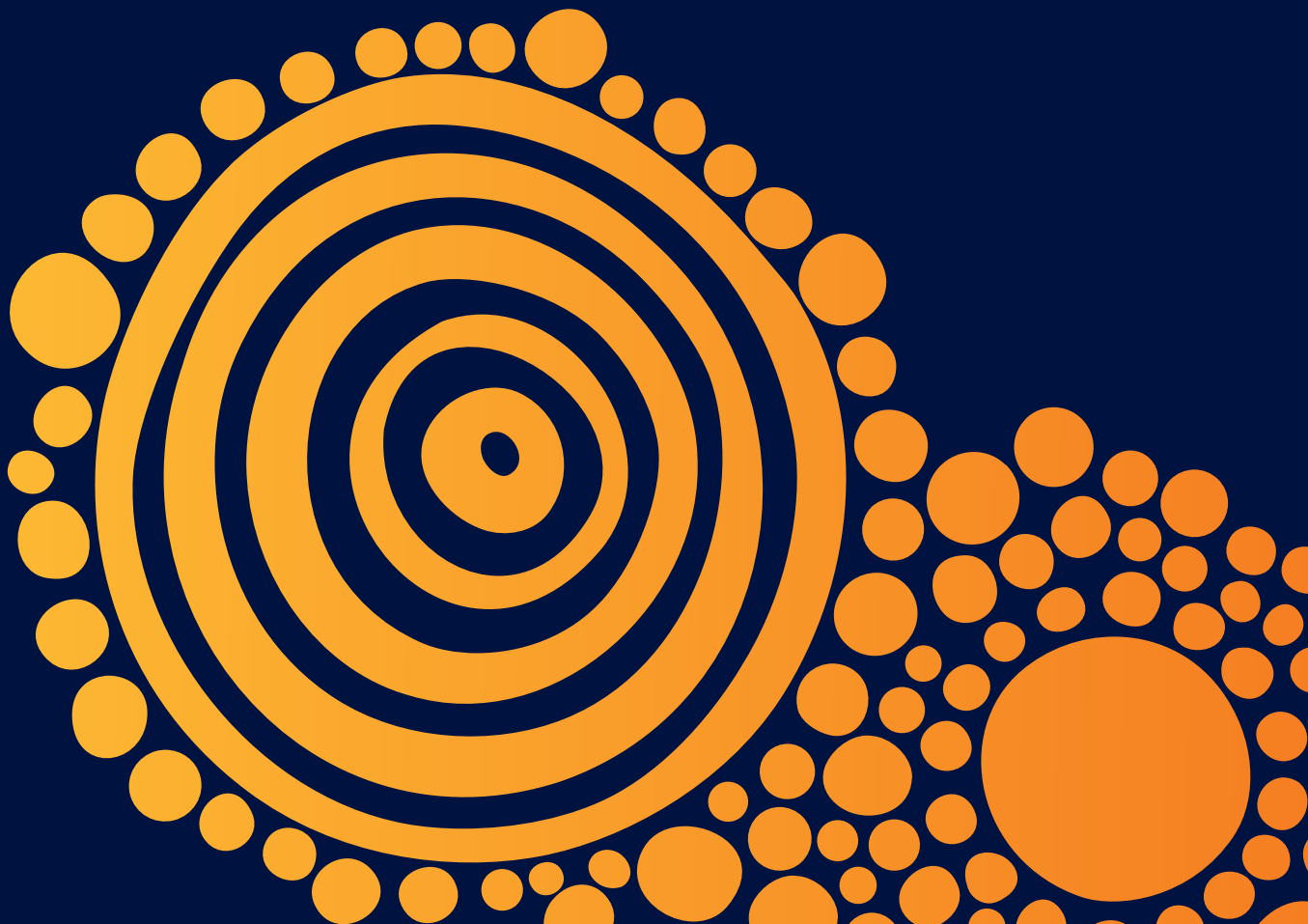
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