

Faecal occult blood test advice

A faecal occult blood test is straightforward, but you should be aware of the issues associated with it before you decide whether or not to go ahead with the test.

Faecal occult blood testing is a way of detecting minute amounts of blood in the faeces. This small amount of blood may indicate a bowel disorder which could include bowel cancer. There have been a number of studies that have shown that there is a reduction in death from bowel cancer of about a third in populations who have been screened with a faecal occult blood test. The reduction seems to be highest in those people who are tested regularly.

Facts about bowel cancer

In the UK, cancer in the large bowel or rectum (colorectal cancer) is the third most common cancer and responsible for the second highest number of cancer deaths. However, it can be cured if diagnosed and treated early.

About one in 18 people in the UK will develop colorectal cancer at some point in their lives, although it is rare in people under 45. Cancer of the small bowel, the longer, thinner part of the intestines is much rarer.

The cancer can spread through the wall of the bowel and into other tissues within the abdomen. When a cancer spreads to another organ, it is known as a metastasis or secondary.

In general, the more bowel cancer has spread from the original site, the less likely it is that the condition will be cured. This is why early diagnosis and treatment are crucial.

Symptoms of bowel cancer

Bowel cancers may bleed easily, so blood in the stools or from the back passage is a cause for concern.

Other possible symptoms include:

- anaemia - sometimes the cancer can leak small amounts of blood that are invisible to the naked eye. This loss can cause anaemia - a shortage of iron in the blood - which can, in turn, cause tiredness and breathlessness.
- a change in bowel habit resulting in either more constipation or diarrhoea than normal.
- abdominal pain.
- unintended weight loss.

A person who has any of these symptoms, particularly if they are over the age of 45, should seek medical advice.

However, just because you have some of these symptoms does not necessarily mean you have bowel cancer. A number of other conditions can have similar symptoms.

The Hemoccult test

As the test looks for blood in the stool, a positive result may mean that there has been bleeding from anywhere in the gut, and does not necessarily mean that cancer is present. In fact, only a small number of people with a positive test will turn out to have bowel cancer.

Similarly, although we ask for three separate samples to be collected it is possible that the test will be negative even if there is a cancer present. This is because not all tumours will bleed regularly or consistently. So if you experience any symptoms such as those mentioned above, even if your test was negative, you should seek further medical advice.

If my test is positive?

If your test is positive, we will suggest that you discuss the result with your GP or a specialist to decide whether further investigations are needed. This may involve a physical examination, which may include feeling the abdomen and examining the rectum with a gloved finger. Further investigations may be organised either by a GP or specialist.

If you have any questions about bowel cancer testing or its implications please raise them with your health assessment doctor during your consultation. Completing this test is just one way of taking care of yourself.

This simple test is an important part of your health assessment making sure that if anything is wrong, you and your doctor will know about it early so that you can receive the best care.

In bowel disease, changes occur which can cause slight bleeding even before you begin to feel ill or are aware of any symptoms. The loss is so small it cannot be seen by the naked eye, however it can be detected by this simple test.



How to undertake this simple test

You will receive an envelope that contains three Hemocult slides; six applicators and a hygienic bag along with enclosed detailed instructions on how to perform the test:

If you are sent the test before your health assessment appointment, please complete it as close to your appointment date as possible and bring it with you on the day. You should ensure that 48 hours have elapsed between completing the third sample and your appointment.

Alternatively, please complete the test as soon as possible after your appointment and return it to the Bupa Health Assessment Centre in the special packaging which can be provided at the time of your visit.

Instructions

- for accurate test results, samples should be taken from bowel movements on **three different days**. If you do not have a bowel movement each day just wait for the next one.
- do not collect sample if blood is visible in your stool or urine (eg menstruation, active haemorrhoids, urinary tract infection).
- for the most accurate test results collect each stool sample before contact with the toilet bowl water. You may use any clean, dry container.
- return completed slides no later than 14 days after your first sample collection.
- protect slides from heat, light, and volatile chemicals (ammonia, bleach, and household cleaners).
- remove toilet bowl cleaners from toilet cistern and flush twice before proceeding.

Collecting samples - This is detailed with diagrams inside the packs but is summarised below.

- write your name and the date clearly on each slide as you use it.
- open the front flap of the text card.
- obtain a pea size stool sample with one of the applicators provided and apply a thin covering of sample to box A.
- from a different part of the stool take a second sample with a new applicator and apply a thin covering to box B.

- close the test card and store in storage pouch provided.
- repeat all steps on the 2nd and 3rd day to collect samples on the remaining two cards as above.
- return all three completed slides together in the pouch provided.

Helpful advice on collecting the samples

- float several sheets of strong toilet paper or sheets of newspaper in the toilet.
- pass a stool into a "potty".
- pass a stool onto a foil freezer container or a paper picnic plate.
- place a large plastic bag over the toilet pan under the seat.

Finally, please do not forget to put your name and date on the back of each test envelope as it is used.

Drug guidelines

- for **seven** days before and during the stool collection period, **avoid** non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen, naproxen or aspirin (more than one adult aspirin a day).
- paracetamol can be taken as needed.
- for **three** days before and during the stool collection period, **avoid** vitamin C in excess of 250mg a day from supplements, and citrus fruits and juices.

Diet guidelines

- for **three** days before and during the stool collection period, **avoid** red meats (beef, lamb and liver).
- eat a well balanced diet including fibre such as bran cereals, fruits and vegetables.

Doing the test is more important than sticking to the dietary guidelines exactly so do not worry too much but you must inform the doctor and health adviser on the day of your visit if you have not fully followed the restrictions above.

Please talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions about medications you take regularly.

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