

A guide for GPs: referring people under the age of 50 for bowel cancer investigation



This factsheet provides best practice guidance for GPs on monitoring and referring people under the age of 50 with bowel problems for further investigation. It aims to give GPs confidence and support in recognising symptoms that could be bowel cancer in younger people.

Bowel cancer in the UK

Bowel cancer is the fourth most common cancer in the UK and the second biggest cancer killer. More than 42,000 people are diagnosed with the disease every year in the UK.

Bowel cancer in people under the age of 50

Bowel cancer can affect anyone of any age. More than 2,500 new cases are diagnosed each year in people under the age of 50. This is around six per cent of those diagnosed, and this number is slowly increasing.

When to refer younger people with symptoms

The earlier bowel cancer is diagnosed, the easier it is to treat. Knowing when to refer a patient, using the suspected cancer pathway referral, will help them to receive a diagnosis earlier, and potentially save their life.

You should refer people under the age of 50 for an appointment within two weeks if:

- they are aged 40 and over with unexplained weight loss and abdominal pain **or**
- their tests show occult (microscopic) blood in their faeces

You should consider referring people under the age of 50 for an appointment within two weeks if they present with any of the following symptoms:

- A rectal mass
- An abdominal mass
- Rectal bleeding **and** one of the following symptoms:
 - o abdominal pain
 - o change in bowel habit
 - o weight loss
 - o iron deficiency anaemia

Monitoring patients and further investigation

Ask your patient if they have a **family history** of bowel cancer, as their risk of developing it may be higher if they do.

If your patient does not meet the criteria above but is still experiencing worrying symptoms, including abdominal pain, change in bowel habits, or weight loss, it's important to:

- Ask them to monitor their symptoms using the **symptoms diary** and if they persist to return for further investigation
- Test that person for blood in their faeces

Keeping your patients informed

Being referred for further investigation can be a worrying time. It's important to give your patient, or their guardian or carer, clear information about **what to expect**.

Most people who are referred to hospital don't have cancer, but acting quickly will give them the best chance of successful treatment if they do receive a diagnosis.

For more information visit bowelcanceruk.org.uk