Simple steps for good bowel health
This booklet contains simple steps you can take to keep your bowel healthy. This is important as these small changes will help your digestive system to work well and help to reduce your risk of bowel cancer.

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The information in this booklet is for people who have not been diagnosed with any bowel conditions. If you have been diagnosed with bowel cancer, you may find our booklet ‘Your diet and lifestyle: living with and beyond bowel cancer’ useful. Visit our website bowelcanceruk.org.uk to find out more.

How your digestive system works

The bowel is part of your digestive system which turns food and liquid into energy that your body can use. Eating healthily helps your digestive system work well and can reduce your risk of bowel cancer.

The picture shows the parts of the body that make up the digestive system.
Eating well

The Government’s Eatwell Guide shows you how much of your daily diet should come from each food group. This includes everything you eat during the day, including snacks.

To stay healthy, we should:

- Eat at least five portions of vegetables and fruit every day.
- Choose wholegrain varieties of bread, rice and wholemeal pasta.
- Eat some fish, chicken, eggs and beans but limit red meat and avoid processed meat.
- Eat some milk and dairy foods but choose low fat, low sugar options.
- Choose unsaturated oils and spreads and use in small amounts.
- Limit food and drinks high in fat or sugar such as sweets, cakes and crisps. They are not needed for a healthy diet and should only be eaten in small amounts.

Fabulous fibre

Fibre is an important part of a healthy diet and helps reduce your risk of bowel cancer. Fibre keeps everything moving easily through your digestive system. You can increase your fibre intake with many of the foods from the Eatwell Guide. Here are some suggestions:

- A healthy breakfast containing fibre is the best way to start the day. Porridge, wholegrain cereals and wholegrain toast are good examples.
- Beans and pulses such as lentils, chickpeas, baked beans, kidney beans and peas are all good sources of fibre as well as protein. Try using these in soups, stews, curries and salads for lunch or dinner.
- Choose wholegrain foods like brown rice and wholemeal pasta instead of white.
- Vegetables, fruit and nuts are also good sources of fibre. Try apples, berries, apricots, figs, carrots, broccoli, parsnips and potatoes in skins.

Keep hydrated

We need to drink about 1.6 to 2 litres of fluid (6–8 cups) every day to stop us getting dehydrated. Water, low fat milk and herbal teas are healthy choices.

Avoid sugary drinks such as cola, lemonade and juice or squash with added sugar. Fibre attracts water to help bulk it up so you need to make sure your body has enough.

Top tip

Vegetables, fruit and nuts are also good sources of fibre. Try apples, berries, apricots, figs, carrots, broccoli, parsnips and potatoes in skins.

The Eatwell Guide

**Getting your 5 A Day**

As well as containing fibre, vegetables and fruit may also help to protect against bowel cancer because they contain antioxidants, substances which help to delay or prevent cell damage.

We all know eating five portions of vegetables and fruit a day forms part of a healthy, balanced diet but do you know how to get your 5 A Day?

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**All about protein**

We need protein in our diet to help our body repair cells and make new ones. There are many good sources of protein shown in the Eatwell Guide on page 4. These include chicken, fish, peas, beans, tofu, lentils and eggs.

But there is strong evidence that processed meat and a lot of red meat increases your risk of bowel cancer.

**To reduce your risk:**

- **Limit the amount of red meat** you eat to 500g or less (cooked weight) per week. This includes beef, pork, lamb and goat.
- **How much is that?** One portion of spaghetti bolognese contains about 140g of red meat and one medium pork chop is about 90g of red meat. Try using chickpeas or beans to replace some or all of the meat in bolognese or chilli recipes. As well as being a great source of protein, they are high in fibre too.
- **Avoid processed meats** as much as possible. These are meats that have been preserved by smoking, curing, salting or adding preservatives. Processed meats include bacon, ham, salami and sausages. These should be an occasional treat and not eaten every day.
- **Include milk and dairy** in your diet as shown in the Eatwell Guide. Low fat options, such as skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, rather than full fat will help you keep to a healthy weight.

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**Ideas to boost your 5 A Day**

**Breakfast**
- Add a banana, or any other fruit you like, to your cereal or porridge.

**Lunch**
- Try a vegetable soup such as butternut squash.
- Include sliced cucumber and tomato in your sandwiches.

**Dinner**
- Include some carrots and peppers in your pasta sauce.
- Add a side salad to any meal.

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**Top tip**

Remember – frozen, canned and dried fruit and vegetables all count towards your 5 A Day. Fruit and vegetables can also make great snacks.

**Here are some examples of one portion:**
- three sticks of celery
- six or seven cherry tomatoes
- a handful of grapes
- an apple, orange or banana
- three dried prunes.
Alcohol and smoking

Alcohol is linked to seven types of cancer including bowel cancer. Alcohol can damage cells, making them more likely to become cancerous. Avoid alcohol as much as possible to reduce your cancer risk.

If you do drink alcohol, limit yourself to no more than 14 units of alcohol a week and try to spread it out over the week. This recommendation is for men and women.

What is a unit of alcohol?

- **2 units**
  - A pint of ordinary strength (3–4%) lager, cider or bitter

- **3 units**
  - A pint of premium strength (5–5.5%) lager, cider or bitter

- **1 unit**
  - A small single (25ml) spirit (40%), with or without a mixer

Smoking

As with many other cancers, smoking increases your risk of bowel cancer. We know that smokers are more likely to develop polyps (non-cancerous growths) in the bowel which could turn into cancer if they’re not treated.

If you want to give up smoking, your local NHS Stop Smoking service offers free one-to-one support. Find out more at nhs.uk/livewell

Get active

People who are more physically active have a lower risk of bowel cancer. Being active can help you keep to a healthy body weight and helps to make you feel good.

Aim for at least 30 minutes of physical activity five times a week. If you don’t do much exercise, try starting with 10 minutes and increase the time gradually. Exercise doesn’t have to be about working out in a gym. Enjoy it!

You can be more active by:
- taking the stairs rather than the lift or escalator
- walking briskly to the shops
- doing the housework
- walking the dog
- getting off the bus a few stops earlier.

Wearing a fitness monitor or using a phone app to count the number of steps you take, could encourage you to walk further.

Try swapping less active hobbies like reading or watching TV, for things like:
- dancing
- swimming
- hiking
- cycling
- yoga

Spend less time sitting down. If you have an office job, try not to sit for longer than one hour at a time, stand up while talking on the phone and take a walk at lunchtime if you can.

Top tip

Don’t forget, if you miss a few days, don’t give up. Just start again tomorrow. Physical activity can really help to reduce your risk of bowel cancer.
Be a healthy weight

Being overweight or obese and carrying a lot of weight around your waist can increase your risk of bowel cancer. Measuring your BMI (Body Mass Index) is a simple way of finding out if you’re a healthy weight for your height. Your practice nurse, GP or dietitian can help you or you can check your BMI on the NHS website nhs.uk.

Take action if you start to gain weight

So, as well as being physically active, here are a few tips to reduce your calorie intake if you need to lose weight.

- Be aware of portion sizes and don’t overload your plate. If you are still hungry, have some fruit after your meal.
- Be wary of ‘large’ or ‘value-sized’ offers. They often give you more food than you need, leading to weight gain.
- Replace fruit juices and fizzy drinks with water and herbal teas.
- Alcohol is high in calories so limit the amount you drink.
- Snack on fruit and vegetables instead of biscuits and crisps.

If you are very overweight, or have health problems, speak to your GP before beginning a weight management and exercise programme.

Symptoms of bowel cancer

It’s important to know what symptoms to look out for because bowel cancer is treatable and curable especially if diagnosed early. Nearly everyone diagnosed at the earliest stage will survive bowel cancer but this drops significantly as the disease develops. Early diagnosis really does save lives.

Symptoms of bowel cancer can include:

- Bleeding from your bottom and/or blood in your poo
- A change in bowel habit lasting for three weeks or more
- Unexplained weight loss
- Extreme tiredness for no obvious reason
- A pain or lump in your tummy

These symptoms don’t always mean bowel cancer. If you have one or more of these, or if things just don’t feel right, go and see your GP.

For more information visit:

- NHS Change4Life
  nhs.uk/Change4Life
- NHS Live Well
  nhs.uk/livewell

Top tip

The energy in the food we eat is measured in kilocalories, often shortened to calories. The recommended daily calorie intake for moderately active people is around 2,000 calories each day for women and 2,500 for men.
Bowel Cancer UK is the UK's leading bowel cancer research charity. We are determined to save lives and improve the quality of life for all those affected by bowel cancer.

We support and enable research, educate patients, public and professionals about bowel cancer and campaign for early diagnosis and best treatment and care for all those affected.

Find out more at bowelcanceruk.org.uk

@Bowel_Cancer_UK

To find out more about this booklet or tell us what you think email feedback@bowelcanceruk.org.uk

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