



**Simple steps  
for good  
bowel health**



**Bowel Cancer UK**  
Beating bowel cancer together

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 could reduce your risk of bowel cancer.

## Contents

- 3 How your digestive system works
- 4 Eating well
- 5 Fibre
- 6 Getting your 5 A Day
- 7 Protein
- 8 Alcohol and smoking
- 9 Get active
- 10 Be a healthy weight
- 11 Bowel cancer symptoms

The information in this booklet is designed to help people achieve a healthy diet and lifestyle to improve bowel health and reduce the risk of bowel cancer. If you have been diagnosed with bowel cancer, you can find out more on our website [bowelcanceruk.org.uk](http://bowelcanceruk.org.uk)

# 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.

### 1 Mouth

Food and liquid enter the body through the mouth. Chewing breaks down the food.

### 2 Oesophagus

Carries the food and liquid to the stomach for digestion.

### 3 Stomach

Stores and breaks down the food into a liquid mixture before slowly releasing it into the small bowel.

### 4 Liver

Produces bile, which helps the body absorb fat from food.

### 5 Gallbladder

Stores bile until the body needs it.

### 6 Pancreas

Produces enzymes (substances that speed up chemical reactions) that help the body digest fat, protein and carbohydrates (starchy foods).

### 7 Small bowel

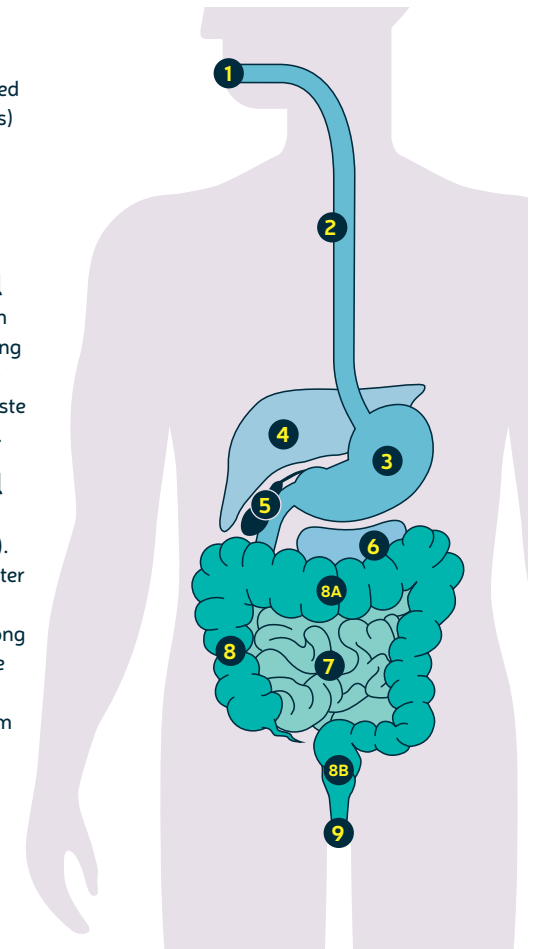
Breaks the food down even further, absorbing the nutrients into the body. Undigested waste moves into the colon.

### 8 Large bowel

Made up of the colon (8A) and rectum (8B). The body absorbs water from the undigested waste as it moves along the colon towards the rectum. Waste (poo) is stored in the rectum until it passes out of the body.

### 9 Anus

Poo passes through the anus as it leaves the body.



# 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 pasta.
- Enjoy more pulses, such as beans and lentils.
- Eat some fish, chicken, eggs and tofu but limit red meat and avoid processed meat.
- Eat some milk and other dairy foods but choose those without added sugar.
- Choose unsaturated oils and spreads and use in small amounts.
- Limit food and drinks high in fat or sugar such as sweets, cakes, crisps and fizzy drinks. They are not needed for a healthy diet and should only be eaten in small amounts.

## The Eatwell Guide



Source: Public Health England in association with the Welsh Government, Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland.

# 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 (including frozen) are all good sources of fibre as well as protein. Try using these in soups, stews, curries and salads.
- Choose wholegrain foods like brown rice, bread and pasta instead of white.



## Keep hydrated

We need to drink about 1.6 to 2 litres (6-8 glasses) of fluid every day to stop us getting dehydrated. Water and low-fat milk are great choices.

Avoid sugary drinks such as cola, lemonade, fruit squash with added sugar and fruit juices (one small glass of fruit juice per day is enough). Fibre and water are a great combination for good bowel health.

## Top tip

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

# 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, which are substances that 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?

## 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.

## Remember

Frozen, juiced, canned and dried fruit and vegetables count towards your 5 A Day. Beans, peas and lentils all count too and are a key part of a balanced diet.



## Top tip

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

# 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. These include chicken, fish, peas, beans, tofu and lentils. But there is strong evidence that eating a lot of red and processed 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.
- 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.





# 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. For cancer prevention, it's best not to drink alcohol at all.

If you do drink alcohol, keep it as low as possible with an upper limit of no more than 14 units a week and try to spread it out over the week. Remember to have at least two alcohol-free days a 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

 **2 units**  
A 175ml glass of wine (12.5%)

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

 **Just under 1.5 units**  
A 275ml bottle of alcopop (5%)

 **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](https://www.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 physical activity, try starting with 10 minutes and increase the time gradually. It doesn't have to be about working out in a gym. Enjoy it!

You can be more active in your daily life 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

## 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. The more active you can be, the better.



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
- cycling
- swimming
- yoga
- hiking

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.

# 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](https://www.nhs.uk)

## Take action if you start to gain weight

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, don't overload your plate and avoid second helpings. 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.
- Avoid sugary drinks such as cola, lemonade, fruit squash with added sugar and fruit juices (one small glass of fruit juice per day is enough).
- Alcohol is high in calories so limit the amount you drink.

- Watch out for extra calories from biscuits, cakes, sweets and crisps. Snack on fruit and vegetables instead.
- Set some goals for making changes.

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

### 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 per day for women and 2,500 for men.

# Bowel cancer symptoms

It's important to know what symptoms to look out for because bowel cancer is treatable and curable especially if diagnosed early. Nearly everyone survives bowel cancer if diagnosed at the earliest stage, however this drops significantly as the disease develops.

## Symptoms of bowel cancer can include:



Bleeding from your bottom and/or blood in your poo



A persistent and unexplained change in bowel habit



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](https://www.nhs.uk/Change4Life)

**World Cancer Research Fund**  
[wcrf-uk.org](https://www.wcrf-uk.org)

**NHS Live Well**  
[nhs.uk/livewell](https://www.nhs.uk/livewell)

**Bowel Cancer UK**  
[bowelcanceruk.org.uk](https://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk)

Bowel Cancer UK is the UK's leading bowel cancer charity. We're determined to save lives and improve the quality of life of everyone affected by the disease.

We support and fund targeted research, provide expert information and support to patients and their families, educate the public and professionals about bowel cancer and campaign for early diagnosis and access to best treatment and care.

**To donate or find out more visit**  
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Please contact us if you have any comments about the information in this booklet: [feedback@bowelcanceruk.org.uk](mailto:feedback@bowelcanceruk.org.uk)



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