



Understanding the Faecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT)

Bowel cancer can develop without early warning signs or symptoms. The cancer can grow inside the bowel for many years before it is detected. Often, small amounts of blood can leak from these growths and pass into bowel motions.

What is a Faecal Occult Blood Test?

A Faecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT) can detect minimal amounts of blood in your bowel motions.

The test involves taking samples from two or three bowel motions using a test kit. These are analysed at a pathology laboratory, and if blood is detected, further tests may be required.

There are currently two types of FOBT in Australia – guaiac and immunochemical. Guaiac tests require alterations to diet and medications, and samples from three separate bowel motions. Immunochemical tests do not require changes to diet or medication, and samples are only taken from two separate bowel motions.

Although FOBT is not the most accurate diagnostic test for bowel cancer, it is currently the most well-researched screening test, and cheapest and most acceptable test available. An FOBT is also non-invasive, compared to colonoscopy and sigmoidoscopy.

Can anyone have an FOBT?

If you have no symptoms or family history of bowel cancer, an FOBT is recommended every two years from age 50.

Risk increases significantly after the age of 50. You are also at a greater risk if you have:

- previous history of polyps in the bowel
- previous history of bowel cancer
- chronic inflammatory bowel disease (ie Crohn's disease)
- a strong family history of bowel cancer
- familial adenomatous polyposis or hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer (Lynch syndrome)
- increased insulin levels or diabetes.

If you are at increased risk, discuss surveillance options with your doctor.

National Bowel Cancer Screening Program

The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program is a population-based screening program for bowel cancer that began in Australia in 2006. Currently the program is only offered to those people turning 50, 55 or 65 years of age. The program uses the immunochemical FOBT.

A test kit is sent in the mail to people eligible to participate in the program. Samples are collected in the privacy of the participant's home and sent on to a pathologist for analysis. Results are sent to the participant and their GP. If the FOBT is positive, further tests are needed.

Where can I get an FOBT?

If you are not eligible or do not wish to participate in the program, you can still have an FOBT.

Your GP may provide you with a test kit, or can refer you to a pathology service, where the test will be carried out. In addition, some pharmacies also have test kits available for purchase. Test kits are available on the internet, however you should discuss the use of FOBT kits with your GP before purchasing such a kit.

What do my test results mean?

If your FOBT results are positive, this means blood has been detected in your sample. About one in 14 people will have a positive FOBT result.

A negative test result means that no blood has been detected in the samples provided. This does not mean that you do not have or won't develop bowel cancer in the future. If you have a negative result you should test again in two years.

Bleeding may be caused by a number of conditions, including polyps, haemorrhoids or inflammation, and may not necessarily be cancer related. However, the bleeding needs to be investigated and if blood is detected, you should contact your doctor to discuss the results and what further tests will be required.

Remember, if you have any concerns or questions, please contact your doctor.

Where can I get reliable information?

National Bowel Cancer Screening Program

Information Line 1800 118 868

Cancer Council NSW 13 11 20

Information and support for you and your family for the cost of a local call anywhere in Australia.

www.cancercouncil.com.au

Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) 131 450