Screening
Studies have shown that screening for bowel cancer saves lives by detecting it early. The NHS is currently piloting screening in the general population to see how effective it would be in practice.

If you are worried about your family history of bowel cancer, ask your GP if you are at sufficient risk to be screened. It's important to realise that bowel cancer is common and cases can cluster in families by chance.

However, your risk of the disease is increased... the more relatives you have on the same side of the family (mother's or father's side) who have had bowel cancer; the younger your relatives were when they were first diagnosed (especially if under 50); the more closely related these relatives are to you.

Early detection saves lives
If bowel cancer is detected early there is a very good chance of cure. But its early symptoms are often overlooked and many patients are diagnosed after the cancer has started to spread.

Symptoms summarised
See your GP if any of the following symptoms persist over a period of two weeks or more. They are most likely to be caused by less serious problems, but need to be checked out:

- Blood in your bowel motions (seen as bright or darker red flecks)
- Blood or mucus in the stool combined with a change in bowel habit
- A persistent change in bowel habit
- Unexplained weight loss

Reduce your risk
- Eat plenty of vegetables and fruit
- Eat plenty of foods high in fibre and starch such as wholegrain cereals, pasta, rice, bread, yarn and potatoes
- Cut down on red and processed meat
- Take regular exercise
- Maintain a healthy body weight
- Moderate your alcohol intake

Family history
If you have a family history of bowel cancer and are concerned about your risk, ask your GP about screening or referral to a family cancer clinic.

Further information
For more about cancer, visit our patient information website at www.cancerhelp.org.uk. Click on specific cancers then colorectal cancer.

If you have a question about cancer you can call our specialist information nurses on their direct line: 0800 7269 3142 or freephone: 0800 (CANCER) 226237.

About Cancer Research UK
Cancer Research UK is the leading charity dedicated to research on the causes, treatment and prevention of cancer. If you would like to support our work, please call 020 7726 9362 or visit our website.

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Bobby Moore was just 51 when he died from bowel cancer in 1993. Since its launch, the Bobby Moore Fund for Cancer Research UK has raised over £1.5 million for research into the prevention, screening and cure of bowel cancer.

... and reduce your risk
Bowel cancer facts
Bowel cancer is a common cause of illness and death in the UK. If it is detected early, there is a very good chance of cure. This leaflet contains information about the causes and symptoms of bowel cancer and suggests how you can take action to reduce your risk.

How common is it?
Bowel cancer is much more common in the Western world than in the developing countries of Asia and Africa. It can occur at any age, but is most common in the elderly and rare in people under 40. In the UK, it is the third most common cancer. The lifetime risk of developing bowel cancer is around 1 in 10 for a man and 1 in 15 for a woman.

What is bowel cancer?
The medical term for bowel cancer is colorectal cancer. Two out of three bowel cancers occur in the colon and one in three in the rectum. These are the last parts of the digestive system through which food waste passes before leaving the body.

What causes it?
Bowel cancer develops when genes are damaged in some of the cells lining the bowel. We do not know precisely why this happens, but a number of things may make it more likely to occur. Of these, diet and hereditary factors are the most important.

A diet that regularly includes lots of red and processed meat, but is low in fibre, vegetables and fruit, may increase the risk of developing bowel cancer.

Some people inherit a greater than average risk of the disease. Around 1 in 20 cases of bowel cancer occurs in someone with a strong family history of the disease, suggesting that they might have inherited a high-risk faulty gene. Another group of people inherit genes that increase the risk to a lesser extent.

Other conditions that may increase your risk of bowel cancer are the inflammatory bowel diseases, ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease. Having a previous polyp or cancer in the bowel may increase your chances of developing another. A polyp is a small growth protruding into the bowel. Some polyps develop into cancer, but this is prevented if they are removed.

What are the symptoms of bowel cancer?
Many of the symptoms described here are usually caused by problems that are much less serious than bowel cancer — so try not to worry should you develop them, but do get them checked out. Bowel cancer is one of the most curable cancers when caught early. By being aware of the warning signs, you can make sure you don't overlook them.

Bleeding (from the colon or rectum)
The most common sign is blood in the stool or faeces (often seen as bright or darker red flecks). Bleeding accompanied by bumps, swellings, itching or soreness around the back passage may be caused by piles (haemorrhoids). Another common symptom of bleeding is anal fissure, which is a cut that won't heal in the back passage. If you notice any persistent bleeding, it is best to consult your GP.

Changes in bowel habit
You should also seek advice from a doctor if you have a change in bowel habit that lasts for two weeks or more. Going to the loo more often and having looser, diarrhoea-like motions, perhaps alternating with periods of infrequent movements, can be symptoms. Having a feeling of not completely emptying your bowels or passing mucus with your stools can also be signs.

Other symptoms
Other signs to watch out for are unexplained weight loss, pain that comes and goes in waves, tiredness or breathlessness without obvious reason, or a lump or swelling in your abdomen.

Help reduce your risk
Your eating habits are very important when it comes to bowel cancer risk. Exercise may also have an important part to play in reducing your risk.

Following the guidelines below cannot guarantee that you will not get bowel cancer, but will almost certainly reduce your risk:

- eat plenty of vegetables and fruit (both raw and cooked) — at least five portions a day
- eat plenty of foods that are high in fibre and starch, such as wholegrain cereals, pasta, rice; bread, fruit and vegetables
- cut down on processed and red meat (beef, lamb, pork) and opt for poultry, fish, beans or lentils
- cut down on fat - choose reduced or low-fat dairy products and select lean cuts of meat
- grill or steam food rather than fry or roast
- take regular exercise — try at least three brisk walks a week or similar (walking to work is one good way of building regular exercise into a busy week)
- avoid becoming overweight (a high calorie intake may increase your risk of bowel cancer)
- keep alcohol consumption within sensible limits — no more than 3-4 units a day for men and 2-3 units a day for women (one unit is half a pint of beer, a small glass of wine or 25ml — less than a pub measure of spirits)