

A woman with dreadlocks and a grey headband is in the foreground, looking to the right. Behind her, a man in an orange shirt is also looking to the right. Both have their hands raised in a yoga-like gesture. The background is a blurred green park.

**Simple steps
for good
bowel health**



Bowel Cancer UK
Beating bowel cancer together

This booklet provides information on simple steps you can take to keep your bowel healthy. These changes can help your digestive system to work well and reduce your risk of bowel cancer.

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The information in this booklet aims to help people achieve a healthy diet and lifestyle to improve bowel health and reduce their risk of bowel cancer. If you've been diagnosed with bowel cancer, you can find out more and get support on our website bowelcanceruk.org.uk

How your digestive system works

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

Bowel cancer is cancer that begins in the large bowel. The large bowel is made up of the colon and rectum. It's sometimes called colorectal 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

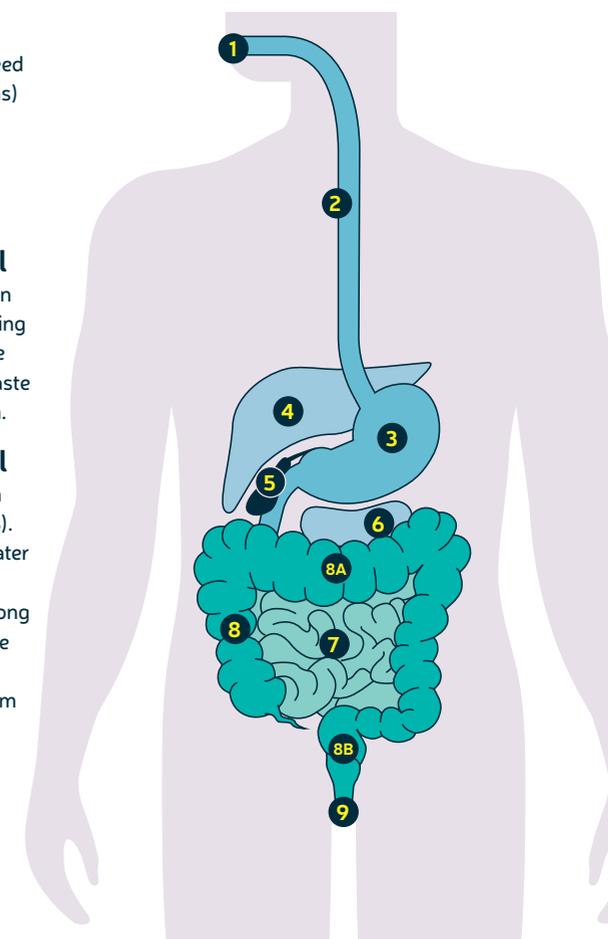
Breaks the food down even further, absorbing the nutrients into the body. Undigested waste moves into the colon.

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

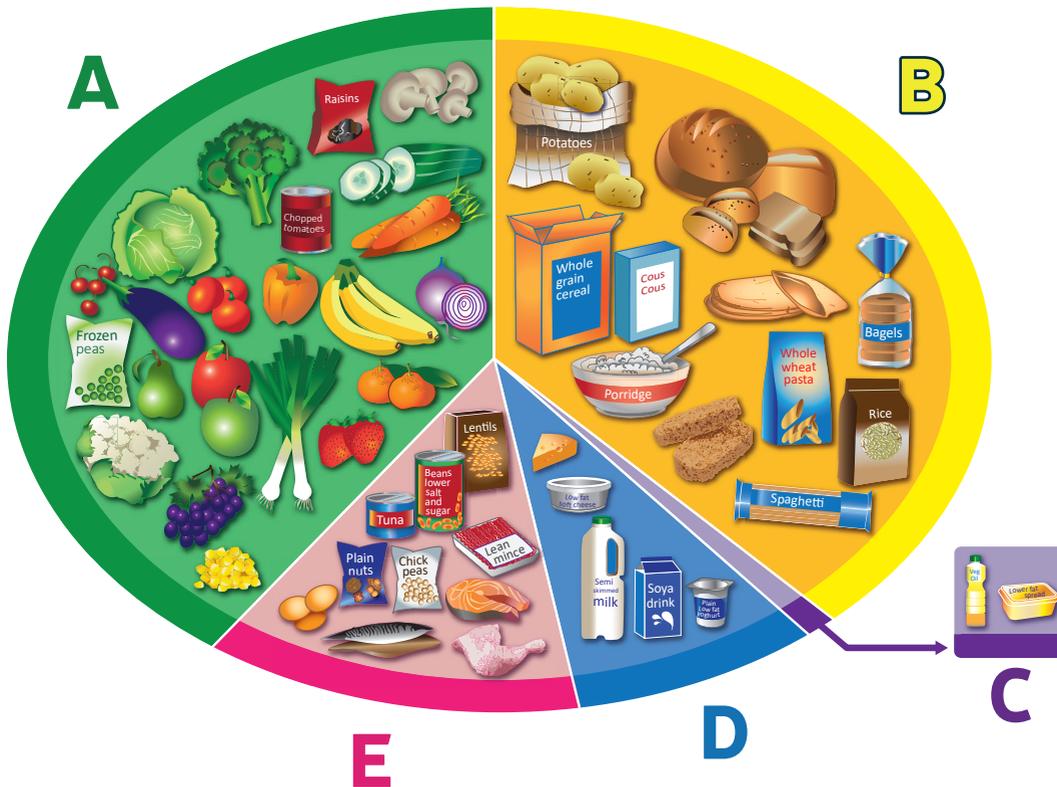
Poo passes through the anus as it leaves the body.



Eating well

The NHS 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 and drinks.

The Eatwell Guide



Fruits and vegetables (A)

It's recommended that you eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day. There's advice on how to achieve this on page 8.

Starchy foods (B)

These include wholegrain cereals, pasta, rice and bread. Starchy foods provide you with energy and are a good source of fibre. There's more information about fibre on page 6.

Oils and spreads (C)

These include vegetable, rapeseed and olive oils, which are sources of healthier, unsaturated fat.

Dairy and alternatives (D)

These include milk, cheese, yoghurt and dairy alternatives such as soya milk. You should include some of these foods in your diet as they are good sources of protein and vitamins.

Protein (E)

Meat, fish, eggs, beans and pulses are all good sources of protein. There's more information about protein on page 10.

Quick tips to help you eat a healthy and balanced diet:

- Eat at least five portions of vegetables and fruit every day
- Choose wholegrain varieties of bread, rice and pasta
- Eat more pulses, such as beans and lentils
- Eat some fish, chicken, eggs and tofu, but limit red meat and avoid processed meat
- Drink some milk and eat other dairy foods, but choose low sugar and fat options
- Choose unsaturated oils and spreads instead of butter, and use in small amounts
- Avoid food and drinks high in fat or sugar such as sweets, cakes, crisps and fizzy drinks

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

Fibre

Fibre keeps everything moving easily through your digestive system. It's an important part of a healthy diet and helps reduce your risk of bowel cancer. It's recommended that adults aim to eat around 30g of fibre each day.

If you want to increase the amount of fibre in your diet, do it gradually to avoid wind, bloating and stomach cramps. If you have a health condition that affects your digestive system, for example irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or Crohn's disease, check with your healthcare team before making any changes to your diet.

Quick tips for increasing the amount of fibre in your diet:

- A healthy breakfast containing fibre is a good way to start the day. For example, porridge, wholegrain cereals, or wholegrain toast with a sliced banana
- Beans and pulses such as baked beans, lentils, chickpeas, kidney beans and peas (including frozen peas) are good sources of fibre as well as protein. Try using these in soups, stews, curries and salads for lunch or dinner
- Choose wholegrain varieties of foods, for example brown rice, bread and pasta instead of white varieties

Examples of sources of fibre



One medium banana
1-2g fibre



Baked potato with skin
5g fibre



25g unsalted nuts
1.5-2g fibre



50g bowl of porridge
5g fibre



Two slices wholemeal bread
6g fibre



80g boiled broccoli
2g fibre

Keep hydrated

Fibre attracts water, so it's important to drink plenty of fluids to stop dehydration. Aim to drink 6 to 8 glasses (1.6 to 2 litres) of fluid every day. Water and low-fat milk can be great choices.

Avoid sugary drinks such as cola, lemonade, fruit squash with added sugar and fruit juices. Limit fruit juice to one small glass (150ml) per day.

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 five a day

As well as containing fibre, vegetables and fruit may also help to protect against bowel cancer because they contain antioxidants. Antioxidants are substances that help to delay or stop cell damage. Eating five portions of vegetables and fruit a day forms part of a healthy, balanced diet.

Quick tips to help you get your five a day:

Breakfast

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

Dinner

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

Lunch

- Try a vegetable soup. Most vegetables work well, and it's a good way to use up any leftovers in your fridge
- Include sliced cucumber and tomato in your sandwiches

Remember

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

Examples of portion sizes

Fruit and vegetables can also make great snacks. Here are some examples of one portion:



Three celery sticks



Seven strawberries



Seven cherry tomatoes



One medium banana



Three dried prunes



One apple or orange



Protein

We need protein in our diet to help our body repair cells and make new ones.

Dairy products and dairy alternatives are also good sources of protein and form part of a healthy diet. Low-fat options, such as skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, can help you to keep a healthy weight.

Red meat is also a good source of protein, however evidence shows that eating lots of it can increase your risk of bowel cancer. This includes beef, pork, lamb and goat.

If you eat red meat, try to cut down to 70g or less of red meat (cooked weight) each day to reduce your risk. If you eat more than 70g one day, try to eat less on the next day, or have a meat free day that week.

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 the meat in bolognese or chili con carne recipes. As well as being a great source of protein, they are high in fibre too.

Research shows that eating processed meats is linked to an increase in the risk of developing bowel cancer. These are meats that have been preserved by smoking, curing, salting or adding preservatives. This includes bacon, ham, salami and sausages. It's best to avoid eating processed meats as much as possible.

Examples of protein sources



Chicken breast



Eggs



Lentils



Tinned fish



Tofu



Peas



Alcohol and smoking

Alcohol is linked to an increased risk of developing several types of cancer including bowel cancer. Alcohol can damage the cells that line the inside of the bowel, which makes it more likely for cancer to develop.

To reduce the risk of cancer, it's best to not drink alcohol.

If you do drink alcohol, cutting down the amount you drink will reduce your risk. It's recommended that men and women drink no more than 14 units of alcohol a week and spread it out over the week. Aim to have at least two alcohol free days a week.

What is a unit of alcohol?

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

1.5 units
A 275ml bottle of alcopop (5.5%)

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

2 units
A 175ml glass of wine (12%)

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

Smoking

Smoking increases your risk of developing several cancers, including bowel cancer. People who smoke 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, you can get free one-to-one support from your local NHS Stop Smoking service. Find out more at [nhs.uk/live-well](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well)

Get active

People who are more physically active have a lower risk of developing 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.

Physical activity doesn't have to mean working out in a gym. There are many ways that you can be more active in your daily life, for example:

- 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
- cycling
- swimming
- yoga
- hiking

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

Remember

If you miss a few days, don't give up. You can start again tomorrow!



Be a healthy weight

Being overweight or obese 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/bmi](https://www.nhs.uk/bmi)

As well as being physically active, here are a few tips to reduce your calorie intake to help you reach a healthy weight:

- Be aware of portion sizes. If you're still hungry after a meal, choose a healthy option, such as fruit
- Be aware 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
- 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

Top tip

Remember, 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 a day for women and 2,500 calories a day for men.

If you're very overweight, or have other health problems, speak to your GP before starting a weight management and exercise programme.

Bowel cancer symptoms

Knowing the symptoms of bowel cancer is important to help spot bowel cancer early. The earlier that bowel cancer is spotted, the more treatable it's likely to be. Research shows that more than 9 in 10 people survive bowel cancer when it's diagnosed at the earliest stage.

Symptoms of bowel cancer can include:



Bleeding from your bottom



Blood in your poo



A change in how often you poo, or regularly having diarrhoea or constipation



Losing weight but you're not sure why



Feeling very tired all the time but you're not sure why



A pain or lump in your tummy

Having these symptoms doesn't always mean you have bowel cancer. But it's still important to find out what's causing them. Even if you have just one of these symptoms, visit your GP and ask about an at-home test.

Find more information

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

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

NHS Live Well
[nhs.uk/live-well](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well)

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

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
[bowelcanceruk.org.uk](https://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk)

 /[bowelcanceruk](https://www.facebook.com/bowelcanceruk)

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Patient Information Forum

Please contact us if you have any comments about the information in this booklet: feedback@bowelcanceruk.org.uk

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