



# Bowel health and screening





## For users of this flipchart

This flipchart has been produced by Cancer Institute NSW as a tool to assist in providing information on bowel cancer and bowel cancer screening to women and men from different cultural backgrounds, particularly those eligible to participate in the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBCSP).

The flipchart has two sections:

**Section 1** explains how bowel cancer develops, the risk factors for bowel cancer, ways to reduce the risk and the signs or symptoms of bowel cancer.

**Section 2** describes the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program and the bowel screening test (why it is so important and how to do it).

The flipchart is designed to be used by bilingual health or community workers /educators talking with community members about bowel screening. It can be used with groups or with an individual.

Users of this flipchart are encouraged to modify the wording provided to suit their particular community.

The flipchart contains a lot of information. However if time is limited, it is possible to use one section only or even just a few pages. The flipchart is designed to be used in whatever way suits the facilitator and participants the best.

## Acknowledgements

This resource draws on earlier work, including:

The flipchart resource 'You're looking good on the outside, but what about the inside? Screening for bowel cancer' developed by Queensland Bowel Cancer Screening Program, Queensland Health, in 2008.

The flipchart resource 'It's not shame, it's a part of life' produced by Menzies School of Health Research (on behalf of the Australian Government Department of Health), to assist health workers to talk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about bowel cancer and bowel cancer screening, in 2018.

Illustrations were completed by Julie Haysom.

Cancer Institute NSW gratefully acknowledges the contribution and input into this resource by representatives of the multicultural health, community and education sectors who participated in the consultation and development process.

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## Facilitator notes - About bowel cancer

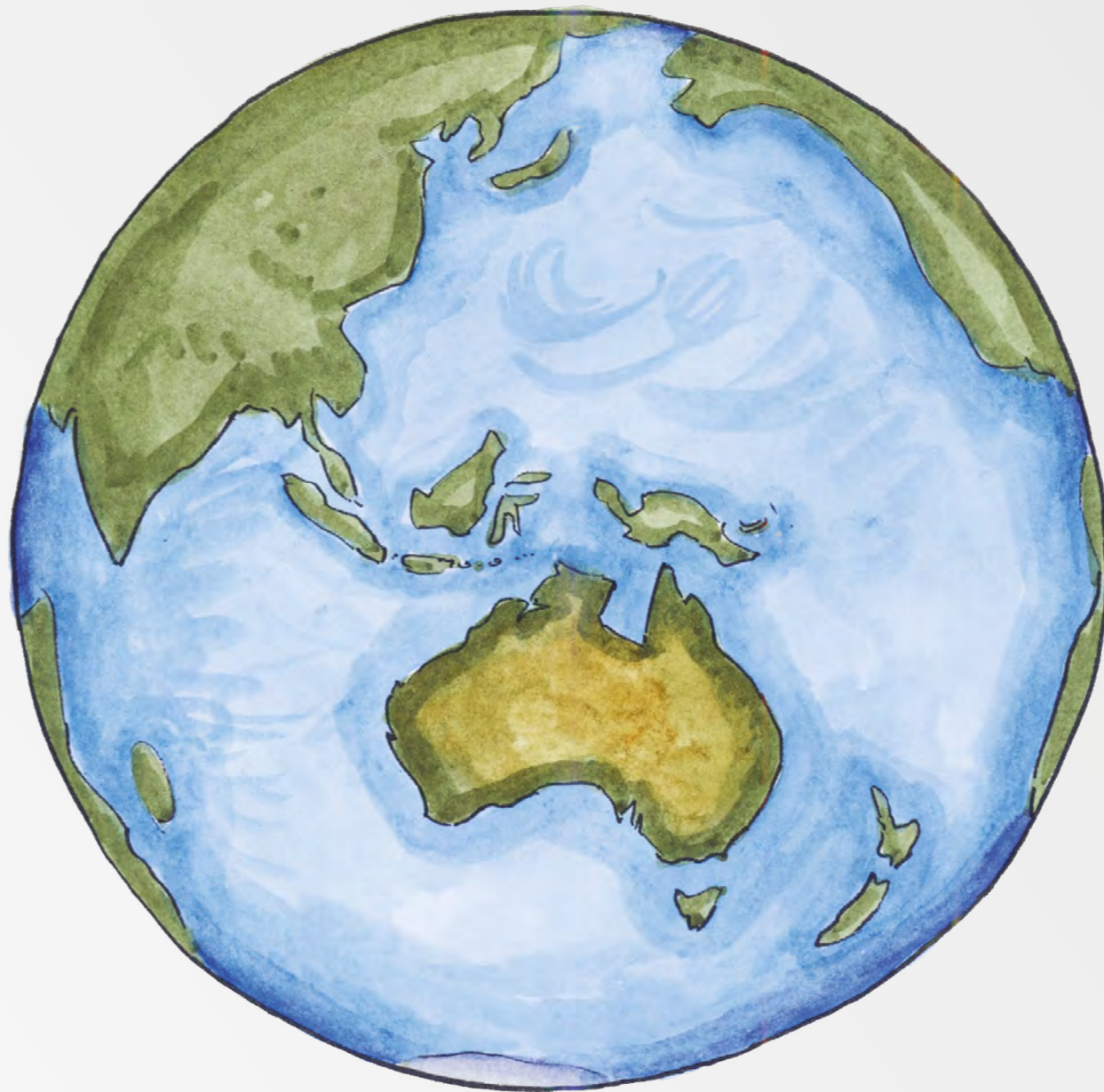
**Bowel cancer is the third most common cancer worldwide (after lung and breast cancers).**

- Australia has one of the highest rates of bowel cancer in the world.
- Bowel cancer often develops without any early signs or symptoms – you can have bowel cancer without knowing it.
- Bowel cancer is one of the most treatable types of cancer if found early. It can be successfully treated in 9 out of 10 cases if detected in the early stages.
- There is a simple, free test you can do at home to find bowel cancer early, which could save your life.

# Section 1

## About bowel cancer

**Bowel cancer is the  
3<sup>rd</sup> most  
common  
cancer  
worldwide**



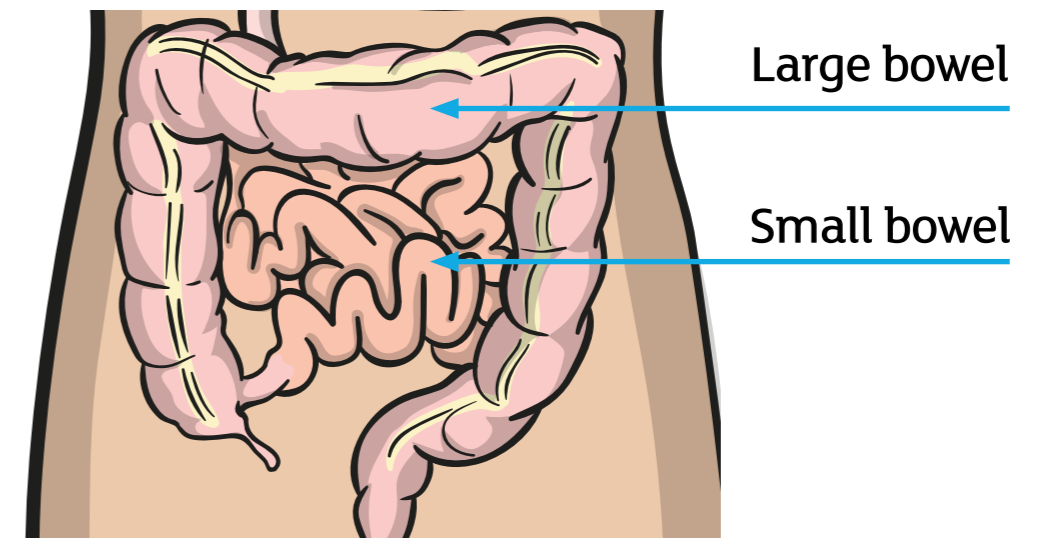
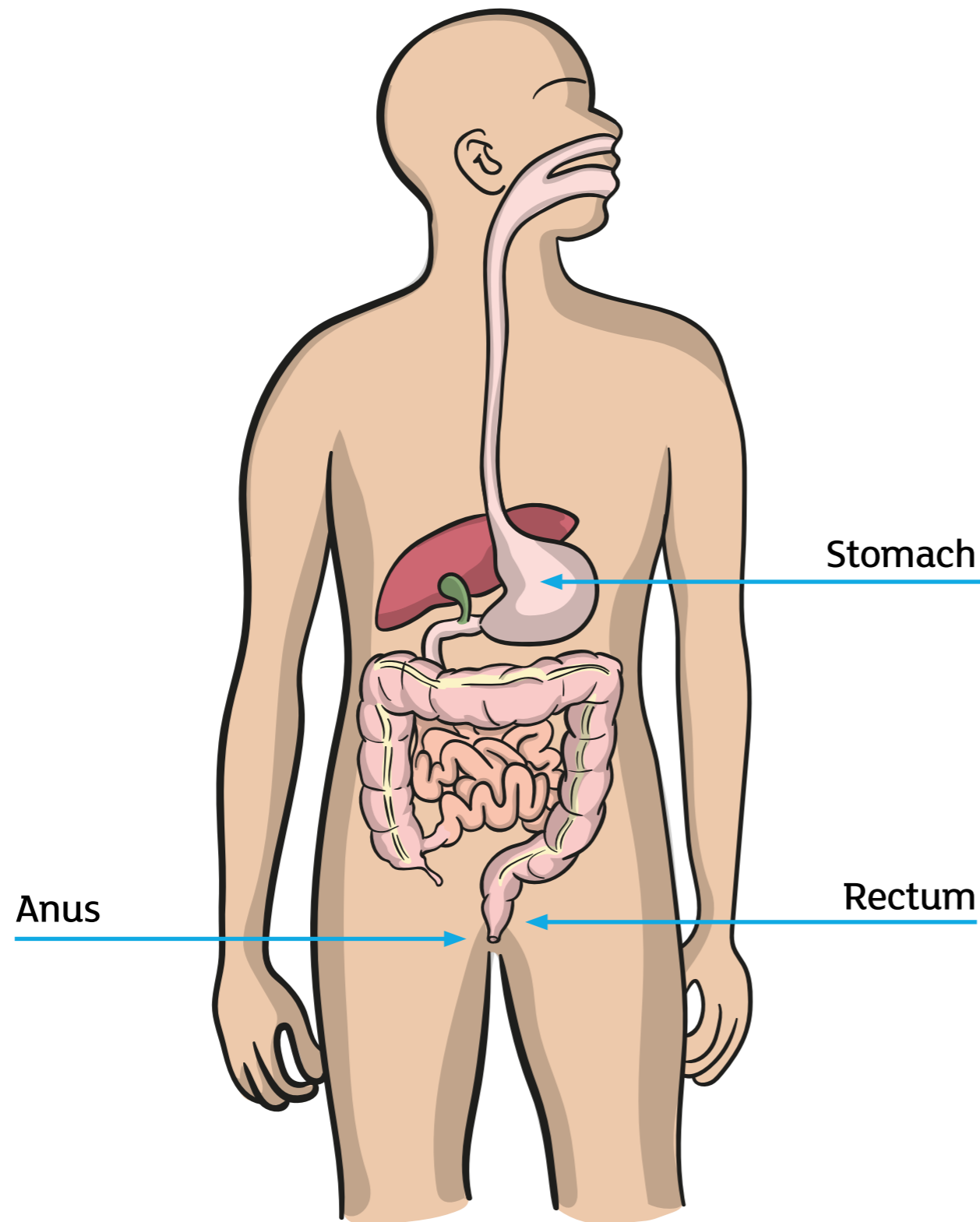
## Facilitator notes - What is the bowel?

The bowel connects your stomach to your rectum where waste material (faeces) is stored until passed out from the anus.

- The bowel has 3 main parts:
  - The small bowel – takes in the nutrients (goodness) from our food.
  - The large bowel (colon) – takes in water and salt.
  - The rectum – stores the waste material (faeces).
- The bowel helps digest the food we eat.
- Digestion is when our food and drink are broken down into nutrients for our body to use for energy and to build and support our cells.

# What is the bowel?

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## Facilitator notes - What is bowel cancer?

**Bowel cancer can take many years to develop and may not show any signs or symptoms in the early stages.**

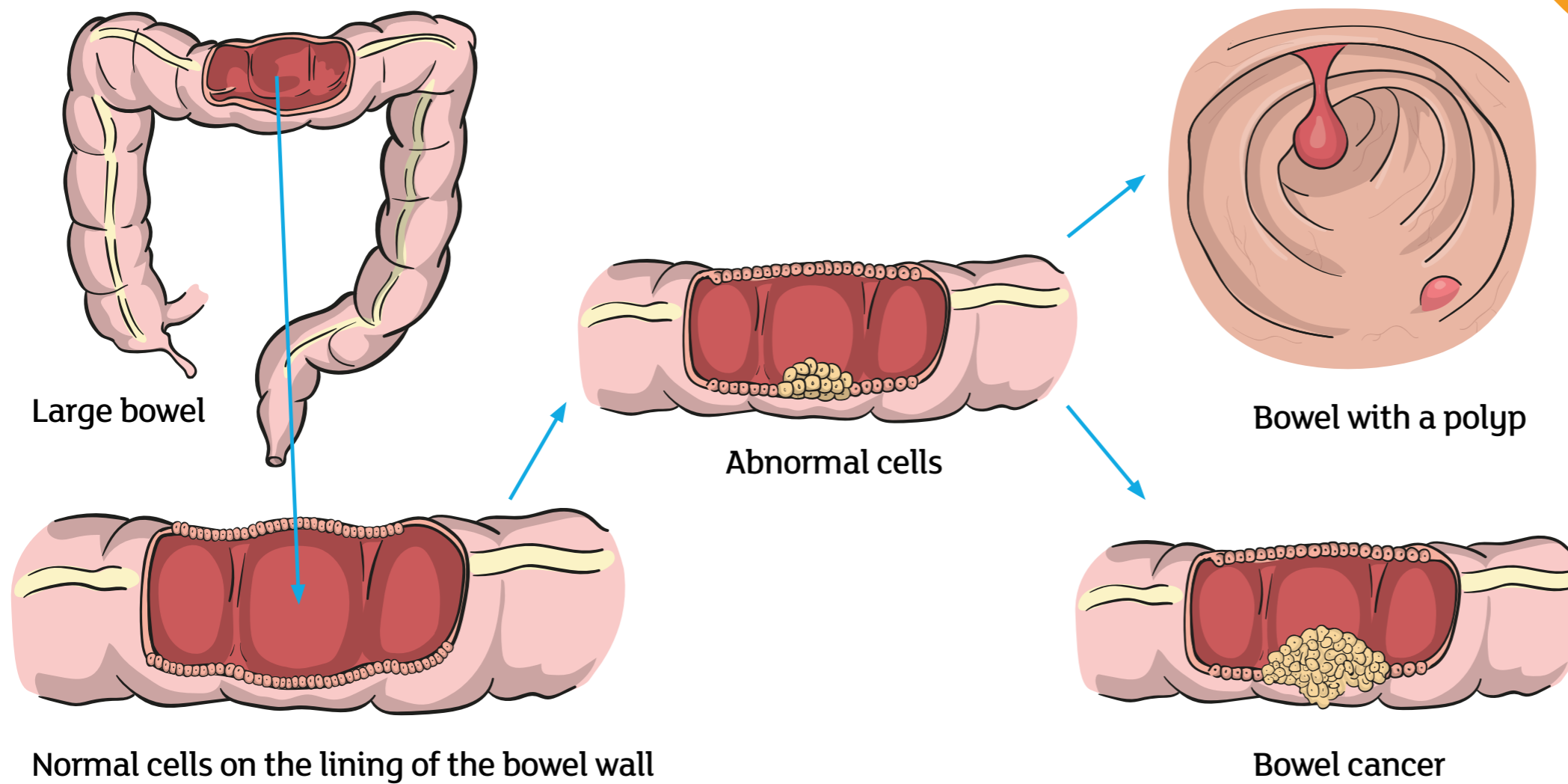
### **How does bowel cancer develop?**

- The bowel is made up of cells.
- For our bowel to stay healthy, old cells are constantly replaced by new cells.
- Sometimes things can go wrong during this process.
- Unlike normal cells, cancer cells don't stop growing. So the cells keep doubling, forming a lump that continues to grow.
- In the bowel, some of these lumps can grow into polyps.
- Polyps are small growths on the lining of the bowel that look a bit like a cherry on a stalk.
- Many polyps are harmless, but some can grow into cancer.
- If polyps are removed, the risk of bowel cancer is reduced.
- If cancerous polyps are not found and removed early, there is a risk that they could grow and eventually spread cancer cells to other parts of the body.



# What is bowel cancer?

**Bowel cancer can take many years to develop and may not show any signs or symptoms in the early stages**



## Facilitator notes - Who is at risk?

The biggest bowel cancer risk factor for both men and women is being aged 50 years and over. 9 out of 10 bowel cancers are diagnosed in people over the age of 50.

The risk of bowel cancer is also higher for people who have:

- A strong family history. This means having a close family member (such as a parent, sibling or child) who developed bowel cancer under the age of 55, or having more than one close family member who developed bowel cancer at any age.

**Note:** Most (8 out of 10) people who get bowel cancer have no family history of the disease.

- Bowel diseases which cause ongoing inflammation of the bowel.
- Type 2 diabetes.
- Unhealthy lifestyle behaviours (shown in the next slide).

# Who is at risk?

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**Bowel cancer risk factors for both men and women include:**

- Age – being over 50
- Family history of bowel cancer
- Existing bowel diseases
- Having type 2 diabetes
- An unhealthy lifestyle

**The biggest risk factor is being aged over 50**



## Facilitator notes - Lifestyle risk factors

**You can reduce your risk of bowel cancer by making healthy lifestyle choices.**

One in four bowel cancers in Australia can be attributed to lifestyle factors, including:

- Smoking.
- What we eat – i.e. eating foods which are highly processed (like white bread, biscuits and chips), eating red meat and processed meats (like bacon, ham and salami), and not having enough fibre (fibre is found in fruit and vegetables).
- Drinking alcohol.
- Being physically inactive.
- Being overweight or obese.

# Lifestyle risk factors

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**One in four bowel cancers in Australia may be caused by unhealthy lifestyle factors, including:**

- Smoking
- Poor diet
- Drinking alcohol
- Being physically inactive
- Being overweight or obese

**You can reduce your risk of bowel cancer by making healthy lifestyle choices**



# Facilitator notes - What can you do to reduce your risk?

You can reduce your risk of bowel cancer by making healthy changes to your lifestyle.

Here are some changes you can make to reduce your risk:

- Quit smoking.
- Eat a healthy diet of wholegrain, wholemeal and high fibre foods such as wholemeal bread, brown rice and porridge. Aim for 2 serves of fruit and 5 serves of vegetables each day.
- Eat less red meat and avoid processed meats (like bacon, ham and salami), as well as highly processed foods like white bread, biscuits and chips.
- Avoid alcohol or reduce the amount you drink.
- Be physically active every day.
- Maintain a healthy body weight.
- If you are aged 50-74, do a bowel screening test every 2 years.

# What can you do to reduce your risk?

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- Quit smoking
- Eat a diet high in fibre
- Eat less red and processed meats
- Drink less alcohol
- Be physically active every day
- Maintain a healthy weight
- If you are 50-74, do a bowel screening test every 2 years



## Facilitator notes - Are there any signs and symptoms?

**Bowel cancer usually has no signs or symptoms in the early stages. This is why regular bowel screening is essential, even if you feel well and everything seems normal.**

However, in some cases signs and symptoms of bowel cancer can include:

- Blood in your bowel movements - there might be blood on the toilet paper or in the water after a bowel movement.
- Unexplained tiredness.
- Stomach pain.
- A sudden and persistent change in toilet habits. For example a person might notice they have looser bowel movements (diarrhoea) or are straining to have a bowel movement (constipation).
- Unexplained weight loss.
- An iron deficiency (anaemia).

**If you have any of these symptoms, it does not necessarily mean that you have bowel cancer, but you should follow up with your doctor.**



# Are there any signs and symptoms?

**Bowel cancer usually has no signs or symptoms in the early stages.**

However, in some cases symptoms of bowel cancer can include:



Blood in  
your bowel  
movements



Feeling tired  
for no reason



Stomach pain  
Changes in normal  
bowel habits



Losing weight  
for no reason

# Facilitator notes - About the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program

The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (the Program) mails out free kits to eligible people aged 50 to 74 for them to complete at home.

- Medicare provides the Program with a list of people who are aged 50 to 74, so that kits can be mailed out to them approximately every 2 years. First time screeners will get a kit within 6 months of their 50th birthday.
- Those who don't do the test will be invited again around their birthday 2 years later. Those who do the test and get a negative result will be invited again 2 years from the date of their test result.
- The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program has been funded by the Australian Government since 2006. The Program aims to reduce deaths from bowel cancer through early detection.
- It is one of the most life-saving public health programs in Australia.

# Section 2

## About the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program



## Facilitator notes - What is a bowel screening test?

A bowel screening test can detect changes in the bowel long before you would notice any signs or symptoms. If you're aged 50 to 74 and eligible you will be sent a free test kit from the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program every 2 years.

- A bowel screening test involves taking 2 small stool samples in the privacy of your own home and posting them away for testing.
- Bowel cancer or polyps can grow on the inside of the bowel and can leak tiny amounts of blood which are invisible to the eye.
- The test is looking for any tiny traces of blood in the stool samples which might indicate a growth inside the bowel.
- If found in the early stages, 9 out of 10 bowel cancers can be successfully treated.

# What is a bowel screening test?

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- The test can detect changes in your bowel long before any signs or symptoms appear
- People aged 50-74 will be sent a free test kit every 2 years

**If found early,  
9 out of 10 bowel  
cancers can be  
treated successfully**



## Facilitator notes - Who should do a bowel screening test?

**Nearly all men and women aged 50-74 should do a test every 2 years.**

- However, if you have any signs or symptoms of bowel cancer or a strong family history (see slide 4 for more detail) talk to your doctor as soon as possible as you may need to have some other tests.
- You also may not need to do the test if you have had a colonoscopy in the last 2 years or are seeing your doctor about bowel problems.

# Who should do a bowel screening test?

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**Nearly all men and women aged 50 - 74 should do a test every 2 years.**

Talk to your doctor instead if you:

- Have any signs or symptoms of bowel cancer
- Have a close family history of bowel cancer
- Had a recent colonoscopy



## Facilitator notes - What's in the kit?

**In your kit you will find everything you need to do the test:**

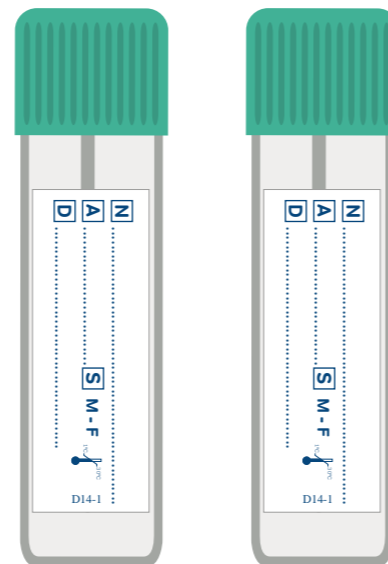
- 2 toilet liners (these are to catch your bowel movement so you can take 2 small samples). These are biodegradable and can be flushed down the toilet when you are done.
- 2 green top collection tubes with collection sticks inside (these tubes are to store your 2 samples and contain a preserving agent).
- 1 ziplock bag with 2 compartments (this is to store your collection tubes and further protect them from touching anything whilst being stored at home).
- 1 reply paid envelope (this is used to post your samples back to the Program's pathology lab).



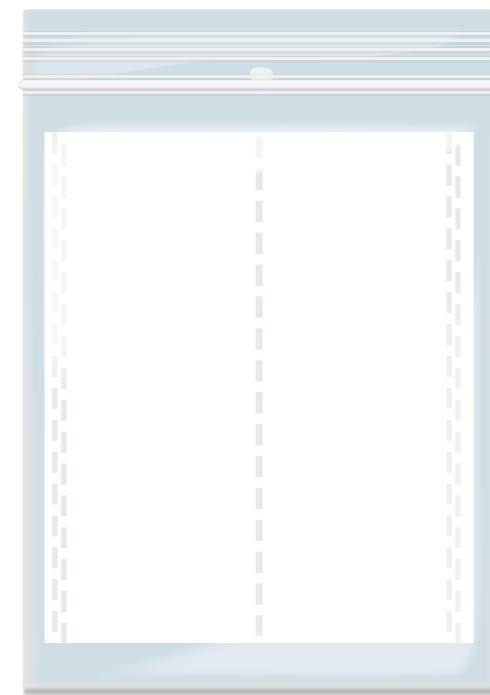
# What's in the kit?



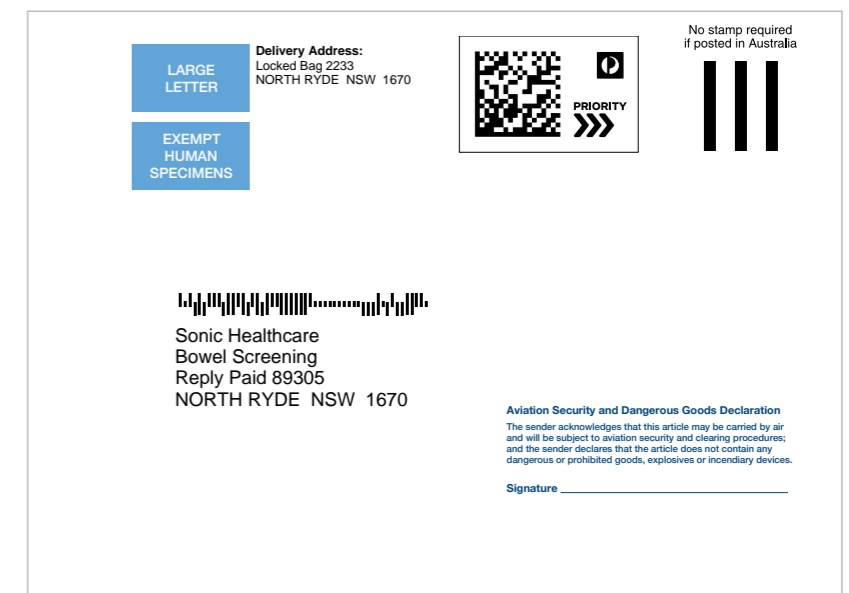
2 x toilet liners



2 x collection tubes



1 x ziplock bag



1 x Reply Paid envelope

# Facilitator notes - How to do the test

## STEP 1 – Prepare

1. On one of the tube labels, write your name, date of birth and date the sample was taken.
2. Before collecting your sample, empty your bladder (do a wee) and flush the toilet.
3. Put the toilet liner over the water in the toilet bowl. The writing should be facing up.  
If the toilet liner sinks, it's still ok to take the sample, or you can request a new kit.

## STEP 2 – Collect

1. Do your bowel movement onto the toilet liner.
2. Open the collection tube by twisting the green cap.
3. Scrape the tip of the stick over different areas of the surface of the bowel movement.  
The sample only needs to be tiny – **smaller than a grain of rice**.
4. Put the stick back into the collection tube and click the lid shut. Shake the tube up and down several times. Do not remove the stick again.
5. Flush the toilet liner and bowel movement down the toilet. Wash your hands.

## STEP 3 – Store and repeat

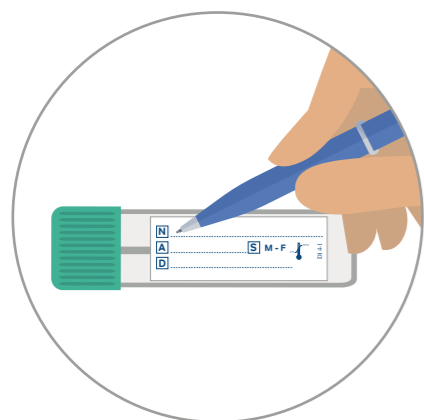
1. Place the tube into one compartment of the ziplock bag.
2. Put the sample in the fridge (**do not freeze**).

**Repeat Steps 1 – 3** with the second collection tube when you have another bowel movement (on the same day, the next day, or as soon as you can).

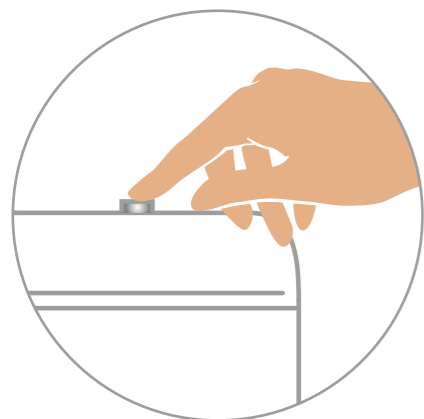
**Turn over for Step 4.**

# How to do the test

## STEP 1 - Prepare



1. Write details on the tube labels



2. Do a wee and flush the toilet

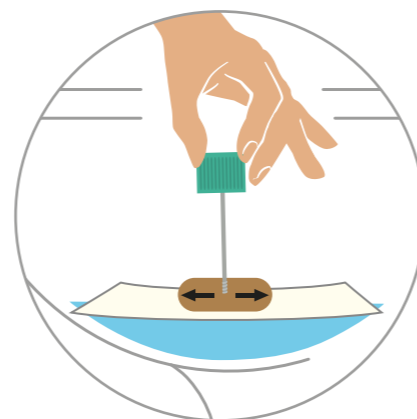


3. Place the toilet liner over the water

## STEP 2 - Collect

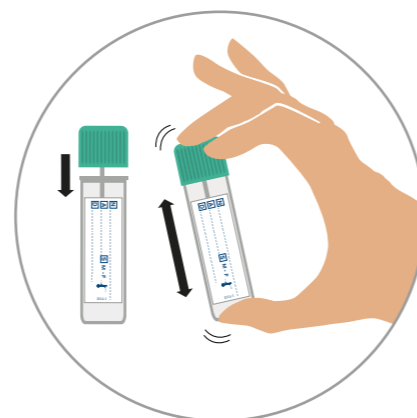


1. Do a bowel movement onto the toilet liner



2. Open green collection tube

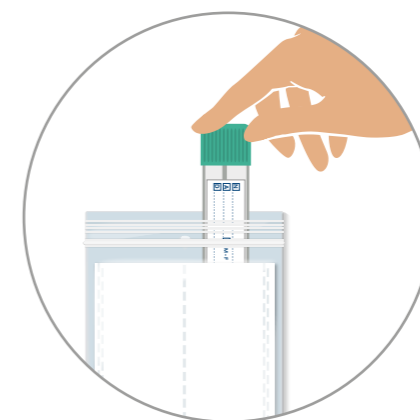
3. Drag the stick through the bowel movement



4. Put stick back in tube and shake

5. Flush the liner and bowel movement

## STEP 3 - Store and repeat



1. Put tube into the ziplock bag

2. Place in the fridge (NOT the freezer)

**Repeat steps 1-3 with the second collection tube when you do your next bowel movement**

# Facilitator notes - Posting the test

## STEP 4 – Send

1. Complete the Participant Details form.
2. Write your name and address on the back of the Reply Paid envelope and sign the front.
3. Put the Participant Details form and the 2 collection tubes (in the sealed ziplock bag) into the Reply Paid envelope and seal it.
4. Take the envelope to a post office **within 24 hours**, or put the envelope in a mail box in the late afternoon (**before 6pm**) using an Australia Post mail box.

## Keeping your samples safe

The samples are sensitive to heat and time.

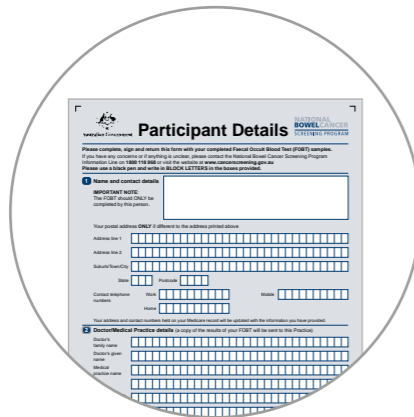
- The samples must remain cool, so do not leave them in a hot place such as a car.
- Store samples in the fridge but never freeze them.
- Post samples within 24hrs of taking your second sample.
- Post at the post office or, if you need to use a post box, do it in the late afternoon when it is cooler (but before 6pm mail collection)



Consider using a sample bowel screening test kit to demonstrate how to do the test.

# Posting the test

## STEP 4 - Send



1. Complete the Participant Details Form



2. Write name and address and sign envelope



4. Post quickly

## Keeping your samples safe

- Keep in the fridge - don't leave them in a hot place
- Send them within 24 hours
- Post over the counter at the post office or mail in a post box in the late afternoon when it is cooler (though before 6pm)

## Facilitator notes - Before you do the test

The test looks for blood in your bowel movement, so delay doing the test if:

- You have haemorrhoids which are bleeding. Wait until your haemorrhoids calm down before you do the test.
- You have your menstrual period. Wait for 3 days after your period before doing the test.
- There is blood in your urine or blood in the toilet bowl. If this happens, see your doctor.
- You are having treatment for bowel problems.
- You are booked for a colonoscopy in the next few weeks or if you have had a colonoscopy in the last 2 years.

**Note:** There is no need to change your normal diet or stop taking any regular prescribed medications before doing the test.

# Before you do the test

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**The test looks for blood in your bowel movement so delay doing the test if:**

- You have bleeding haemorrhoids
- You have your menstrual period
- There is blood in your urine or toilet bowl
- You are having treatment for bowel problems
- You are booked for a colonoscopy soon
- You have had a colonoscopy in the last 2 years

## Facilitator notes - What happens next?

You will receive a results notification letter in the mail about 2 weeks after you post the samples.

### A negative test result

- If your test is negative it means no blood was found. You don't need to do anything, just do another test in 2 years' time.
- But talk to your doctor if you have any symptoms before your next test. The test is very accurate but a negative result does not mean that you definitely don't have bowel cancer or can never develop bowel cancer.

### A positive test result

- If your test is positive it means blood was found. You will need to see a doctor for a check-up and maybe some more tests.
- **If the test is positive it does not necessarily mean you have cancer.**
- Bleeding may be caused by a number of conditions, including polyps, haemorrhoids or inflammation, and may not be cancer related.
- But it is important to find out why there is blood in your sample.



# What happens next?

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## Test results – what they mean:

- A negative test means no blood was found. Do the test again in 2 years.
- + A positive test means blood was found. It does not necessarily mean you have cancer. But you need to see your doctor to find out why there is blood in your bowel movement.

# Facilitator notes - After a positive test result

After a positive test result, it is important to see your doctor as soon as possible so you can receive a referral for another test, usually a colonoscopy.

- The aim of a colonoscopy is to look inside the bowel and find out why you have blood in your bowel movement.
- During a colonoscopy a doctor inserts a tiny camera into the rectum to look for polyps or cancerous growths.
- You will receive some sedation for the procedure so you won't feel any pain.
- The day before the colonoscopy you will need to have a special drink to help empty your bowel. This will allow the camera a clear view of your bowel. You will need to be near a toilet all day.

## Results

There are a number of possible things that a colonoscopy might find.

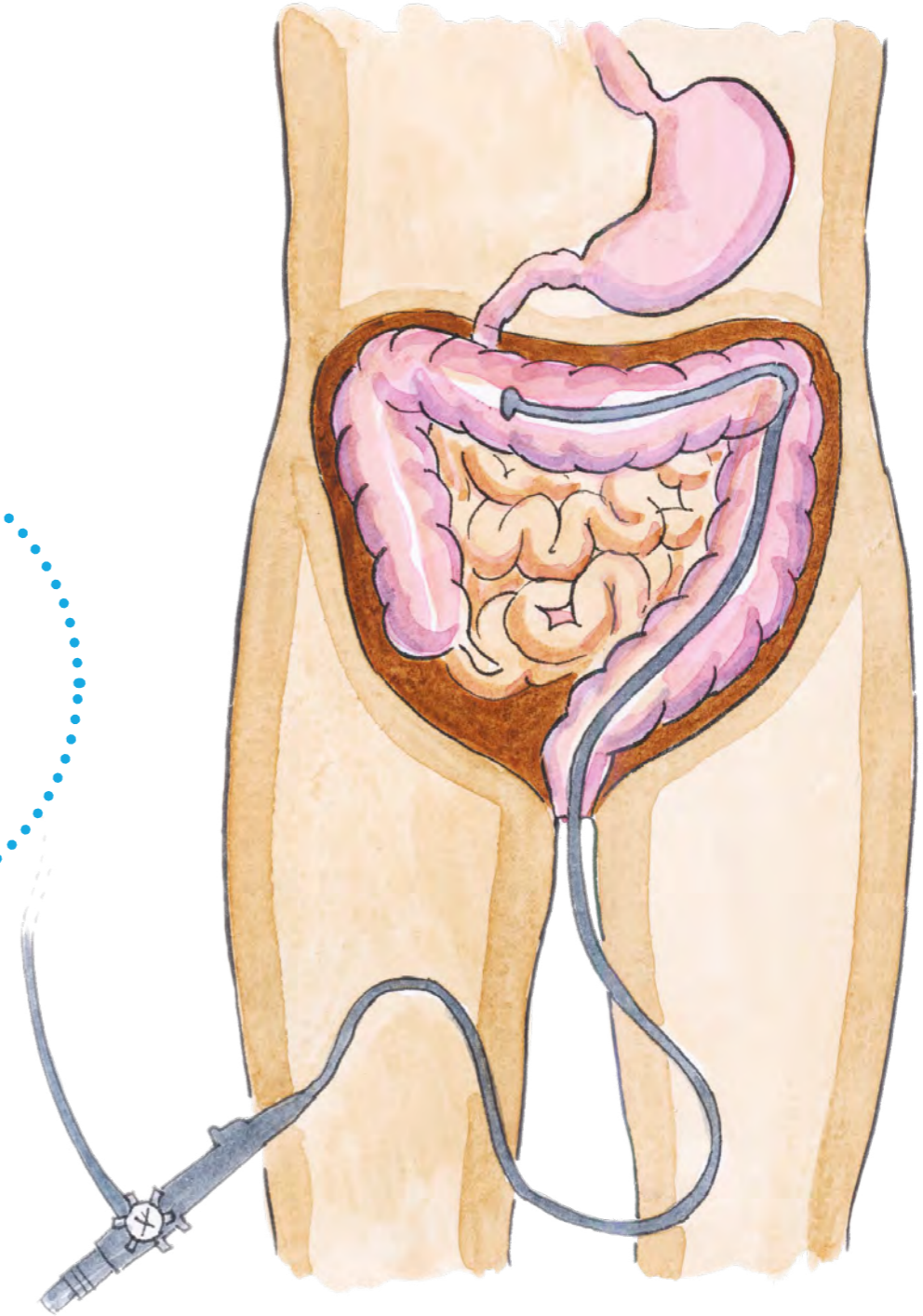
- **Nothing (clear)** – No polyps or cancer. You should do the home test kit again in around 4 years' time. A kit will be sent to you by the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program.
- **Polyps** – The doctor will usually remove them when doing the colonoscopy. You will likely need another colonoscopy in 2-5 years.
- **Cancer** – May need surgery or other treatment (to be determined by a doctor).  
**If found early, the chance of successful treatment is very high.**
- **Other conditions** – The colonoscopy may find other bowel conditions.  
Your doctor will follow these up with you.

# After a positive test result

1. See your doctor

2. Have a colonoscopy

3. Get results



## Facilitator notes - For more information

- Visit the Program website at **[www.health.gov.au/nbcsp](http://www.health.gov.au/nbcsp)**.
- Find out when your test will be sent (based on your date of birth) by visiting **[www.dothetest.com.au](http://www.dothetest.com.au)** (available in a range of languages).
- Call the National Cancer Screening Register on **1800 627 701**, where you can:
  - Check your eligibility for a free kit – confirm the Program has your correct details and find out when your next kit is coming out.
  - Order a new kit (for people who have received a kit in the past but lost or damaged it).
- If you need help in your language call the Translating and Interpreting Service on **13 14 50**.
- You can access a range of translated materials in 22 languages by visiting **[www.health.gov.au/nbcsp-translations](http://www.health.gov.au/nbcsp-translations)** (including test kit instructions, an information booklet and invitation/results letters).

# For more information

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Visit the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program website:

**[www.health.gov.au/nbcsp](http://www.health.gov.au/nbcsp)**

Check when you will receive your test:

**[www.dothetest.com.au](http://www.dothetest.com.au)**

Call **1800 627 701** to:

- Check your eligibility for a free kit
- Order a new kit (if you have lost or damaged your original kit)

Or call the Translating and Interpreting Service on **13 14 50** (for help in your language)

Access translated materials:

**[www.health.gov.au/nbcsp-translations](http://www.health.gov.au/nbcsp-translations)**

## Facilitator notes - Summary

**So what are the important take home messages we have learnt today?**

1. Bowel cancer can develop over a long period, without any obvious signs.
2. A screening test can detect changes in your bowel early.
3. If found early, 9 out of 10 bowel cancers can be successfully treated.
4. Do the test when it comes in the post.

# Summary

## 4 things to remember

- Bowel cancer can develop over a long period, without any obvious signs
- A screening test can find changes in your bowel early
- If found early, 9 out of 10 bowel cancers can be successfully treated
- **Do the test when it comes in the post**



# Facilitator notes - National cancer screening programs

**Cancer screening is the use of simple tests to look for early signs of cancer, or the conditions that cause cancer.**

- Screening tests can find cancer before you can see or feel any changes to your body. When you find cancers early, they are easier to treat successfully.
- In Australia there are 3 national screening programs. These are for bowel, breast and cervical cancers.
- If you are unsure about doing a screening test, talk to your doctor to help you decide.



# National cancer screening programs

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## NATIONAL BOWELCANCER SCREENING PROGRAM



## NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAM

A joint Australian, State and Territory Government Program

Early detection  
through screening  
saves lives

## Facilitator notes - Breast screening

Women aged 50-74 should have a mammogram every 2 years.

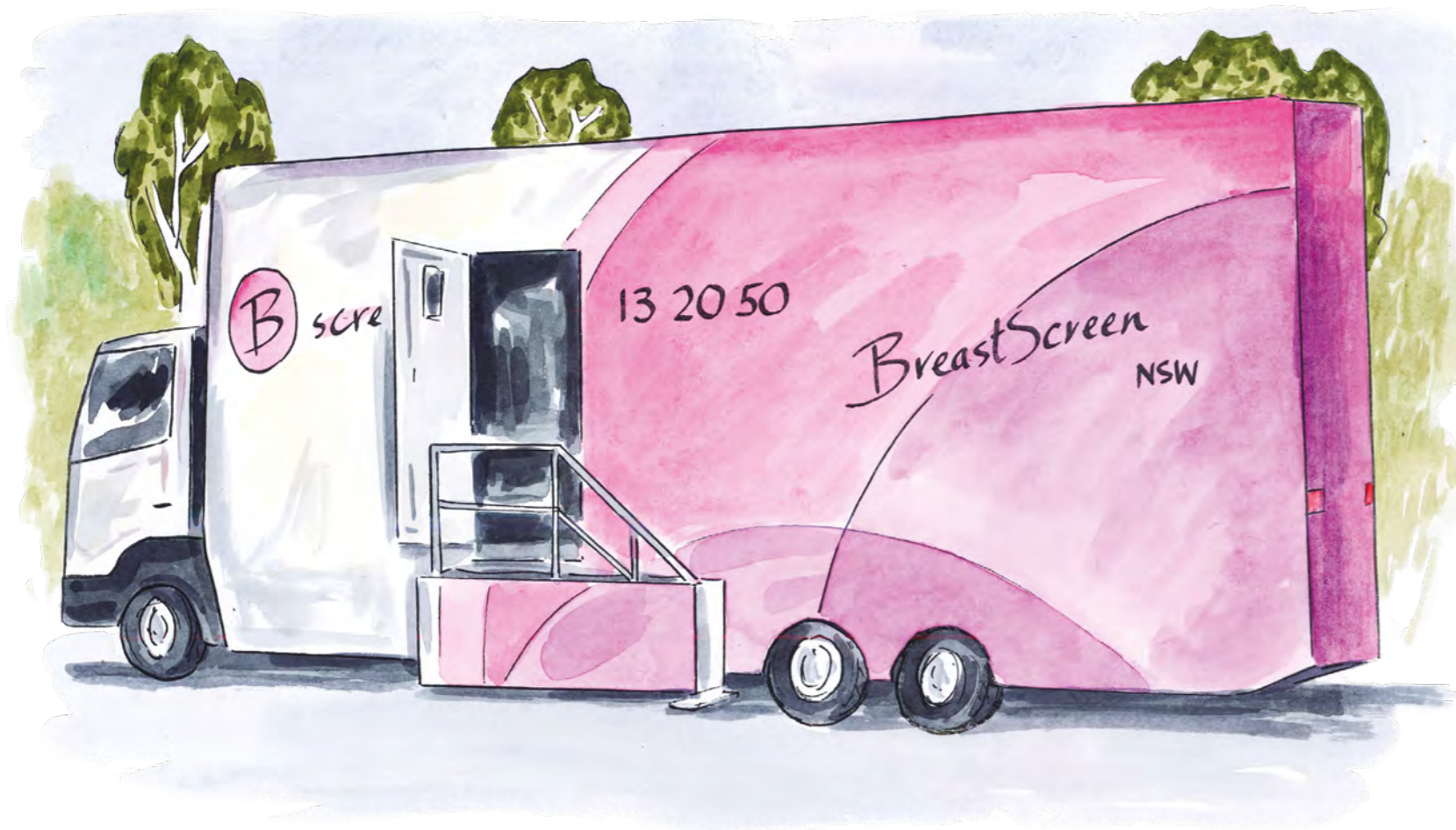
- Mammograms through BreastScreen NSW are free and a doctor's referral is not needed.
- A mammogram (also called a breast x-ray) is the best way to find breast cancer early before it can be seen or felt.
- Almost all women who find their breast cancer in the early stages will get better and get back to their normal lives.
- Most women diagnosed with breast cancer do not have a family history.
- All staff at the breast screening appointment will be female.
- Call **13 20 50** to book a free BreastScreen appointment. There are many sites available so you can choose a date, time and location that suits you.
- Call **13 14 50** if you need someone who speaks your language to help you book the appointment.

# Breast screening

BreastScreen NSW is free and a doctor's referral is not needed.

Call **13 20 50** to make an appointment or **13 14 50** to use an interpreter.

**Women aged 50–74 should have a mammogram every 2 years**



## Facilitator notes - Cervical screening

- Women aged 25-74 should have cervical screening every 5 years.
- You can book a Cervical Screening Test with your local doctor or nurse. You don't need to go to a specialist doctor.
- Some doctors provide this for free. You can ask about the cost when you book an appointment.
- You can ask for a female doctor or nurse to perform the test.
- Cervical cancer can be prevented by having the Cervical Screening Test, because it looks for an infection which causes cervical cancer.
- **Book an appointment with your doctor or nurse.**

**Note:** If it's been more than 2 years since your last Pap test or you have never had a test before, you should book an appointment as soon as possible. If the result is normal you will then be due for your next test in 5 years' time.

# Cervical screening

Cervical screening prevents cervical cancer by finding the infection which causes it.

Book an appointment with your doctor or nurse.



**Women aged  
25-74 should have  
cervical screening  
every 5 years**



**Cancer Institute NSW**

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