

The faecal occult blood (FOB) test

This information is an extract from the booklet, *Understanding bowel cancer screening*. You may find the full booklet helpful. We can send you a copy free – see page 6.

Contents

- The FOB test kit
- Doing the test
- Collecting your samples
- Test results

Bowel cancers and polyps can sometimes bleed, which is why screening looks for blood in your bowel. Occult blood means blood that is not visible to the eye and the faecal occult blood (FOB) test is a way of detecting tiny amounts of 'hidden' blood in your bowel motions.

The test doesn't tell you if you have bowel cancer, or a polyp, but if you have blood in your bowel motions you may be offered further tests to find out the cause of the bleeding. You may have to repeat the FOB test or have an examination of your bowel.

If you are sent an FOB test kit and you aren't sure whether you should do the test or not, you should call the freephone helpline number, which will be on the letter that comes with the test.

You don't have to take part in the bowel cancer screening programme. If you don't want to take part you can simply choose not to complete and return the FOB test kit, or you

**WE ARE
MACMILLAN.
CANCER SUPPORT**

 **cancerbackup**

Macmillan and Cancerbackup have merged.
Together we provide free, high quality information for all.

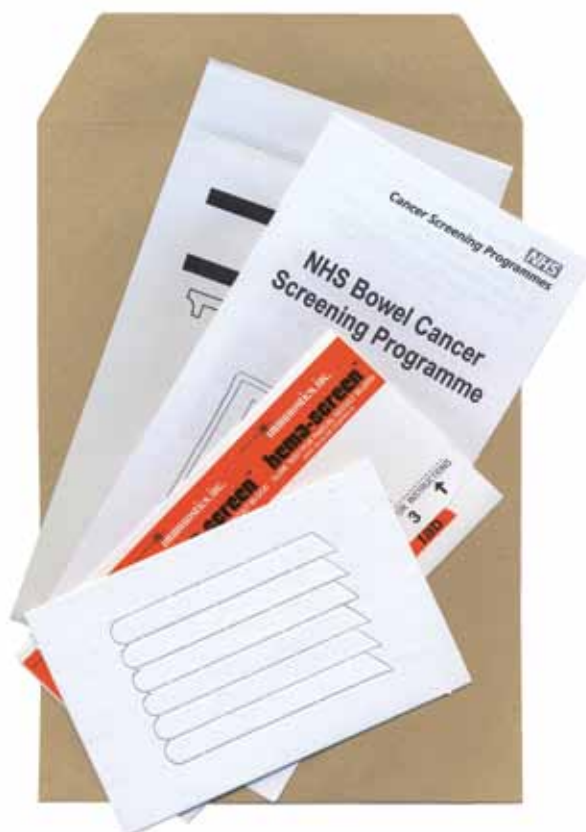
can contact the freephone number on the letter to let the programme know that you don't want to participate.

The FOB test kit

After you've received a letter inviting you to take part in the bowel cancer screening programme, you'll be sent an FOB test kit and instructions, which you use in the privacy of your own home. In Scotland you'll be sent the letter at the same time as the kit.

The kit includes:

- full instructions
- six cardboard sticks to collect the samples
- an orange or red and white test card
- a prepaid hygienic envelope to return the samples.



Example of a test kit

There are three parts to the test for three separate bowel motions.

Doing the test

Before collecting each bowel motion it's a good idea to get everything ready. You'll need to have two of the cardboard sticks and the orange or red and white test card. Write the date on the first flap on the test card, then peel back the flap. Underneath you'll see two windows – one for each sample of your bowel motion.



The FOB test

Collecting your samples

It's important that the bowel motion you use to collect your sample from has not been in the toilet bowl, as this can affect the result of the test. You can collect the bowel motion in different ways. You can use a clean disposable plastic container, such as a cleaned margarine or ice cream tub. Alternatively you can collect it on a sheet of newspaper, which you can place across the toilet pan and secure under the rim of the toilet seat. Make sure the newspaper doesn't touch the water in the toilet.

Once you've collected your bowel motion, use one of the cardboard sticks to take a small piece. Spread it thinly over the first window on the test card. Use the second cardboard

stick to collect a sample from a different area of your bowel motion. Spread it thinly over the second window.

Once you've completed both windows, seal the flap on the test card. Wipe the cardboard sticks with toilet paper, wrap them up and throw them away in an outside bin. Don't flush them down the toilet.

The second and third samples are collected in the same way, using the two windows on the test card under flap two and then flap three. All three samples need to be taken from three different bowel motions, but they don't have to be collected from three in a row.

It's important that all the samples are collected and the kit returned within 14 days of the first sample. Once you have all three samples, you can send the kit to be tested using the prepaid hygienic envelope.

If you have any questions about the sample collection, or if you need a new test kit to start again, you can call the freephone helpline number, which will be printed on the kit instructions.

If you don't return the test kit, you'll get a reminder after about four weeks. If you've decided not to participate in the screening programme, you can either ignore the reminder or contact the helpline number to tell them you won't be sending your kit back.

FOB test results

You should get the results of your FOB test in writing within two weeks of the test being received for analysis at the laboratory. Your GP will also get a letter with your results. Waiting for your results may be an anxious time for you and it may help to talk things over with a relative or close friend. You can also call the Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 00 00**.

The three possible FOB test results are:

- normal
- abnormal
- unclear.

Normal result

About 98 out of 100 people (98%) will have a normal result. A small number of people will have repeated the test due to an unclear result the first time. If your result is normal, you'll be invited to do an FOB test again in two year's time.

The letter will include information about the symptoms of bowel cancer, so that you know what to look out for. If you're worried about any symptoms that develop between your two-yearly screening tests, you should make an appointment with your GP.

Abnormal result

Around 2 in 100 people (2%) will have an abnormal result. Sometimes, someone with an abnormal result will have repeated the test due to a previous unclear result. If your result is abnormal, you'll be sent a letter and an appointment to see a specialist practitioner at your local hospital or screening centre. Your appointment should be arranged within a week of receiving your letter. Your GP will also be told your results.

Having an abnormal result is not a diagnosis of cancer. The abnormal result may be caused by conditions other than cancer, such as piles (haemorrhoids), a bleeding polyp or inflammatory bowel diseases, such as Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis. You will usually be advised to have an examination of your bowel (a colonoscopy), so that a diagnosis can be made.

Unclear result

Around 4 in 100 people (4%) may initially receive an unclear result. This means that there was a hint of blood in the sample, but not enough to give an abnormal result. An unclear result can be caused by conditions such as piles (haemorrhoids). Having an unclear result doesn't mean you have bowel cancer: it simply means that the FOB test needs to be repeated.

You'll be asked to repeat the FOB test. The repeat FOB test may be slightly different from the test you've already done so you should carefully read the instructions that come with the kit before doing the test. If the results of further tests are still unclear, or abnormal, you'll be given an appointment to see a specialist practitioner to discuss having a colonoscopy. If the result of your repeat test is normal, you may be sent

another kit just to confirm the result. Other reasons you may be asked to repeat the FOB test are:

Technical failure

Sometimes there's a technical problem when your samples are tested in the laboratory. If this happens you'll be sent a letter and another test kit to collect more samples.

Spoilt kit

Sometimes the FOB kit can't be tested in the laboratory because it hasn't been used properly or has been damaged. If this happens you'll be sent a letter and a replacement kit.

More information and support

If you have any questions about cancer, ask Macmillan. If you need support, ask Macmillan. Or if you just want someone to talk to, ask Macmillan.

Our cancer support specialists are here for everyone living with cancer, whatever you need.

Call free on 0808 808 00 00, Monday–Friday, 9am–8pm.

www.macmillan.org.uk

We make every effort to ensure that the information we provide is accurate but it should not be relied upon to reflect the current state of medical research, which is constantly changing. If you are concerned about your health, you should consult your doctor. Macmillan cannot accept liability for any loss or damage resulting from any inaccuracy in this information or third party information such as information on websites to which we link. © Macmillan Cancer Support 2010. Registered charity in England and Wales (261017), Scotland (SC039907) and the Isle of Man (604). Registered office 89 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7UQ

REVISED IN AUGUST 2010