



Bowel cancer: English

This information is about bowel cancer and treatments for bowel cancer.

If you have any questions about this information, ask your doctor or nurse at the hospital where you are having treatment.

You can also call Macmillan Cancer Support on freephone **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your own language. When you call us, please tell us in English which language you need.

There is more cancer information in your language and other languages at [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

This information is about:

- The bowel
- Bowel cancer
- How treatment is planned
- Talking to your healthcare team
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- Follow up
- Your feelings
- Getting the right care and support for you
- How Macmillan can help you
- More information in your language
- References and thanks

The bowel

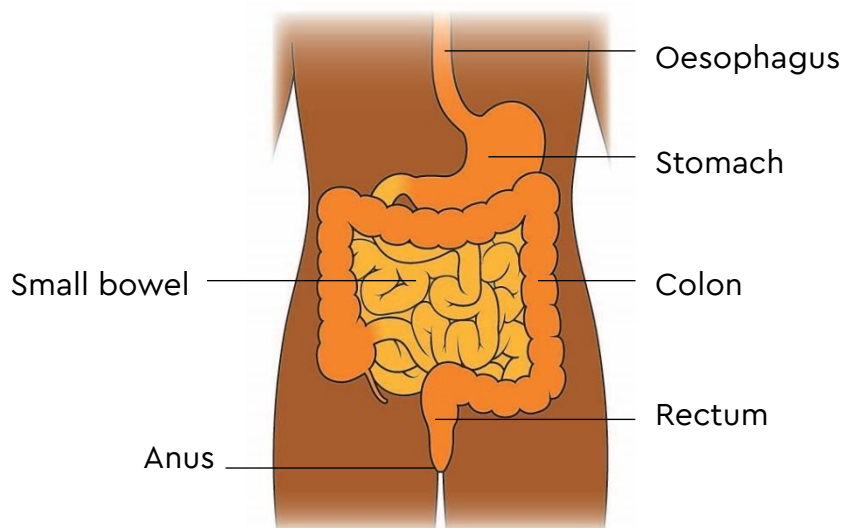
The bowel is part of the digestive system. The digestive system breaks down and absorbs food so that the body can use it.

The bowel has 2 parts:

- the small bowel
- the large bowel.

The large bowel has three parts. These are:

- the colon
- the rectum
- the anus.



Bowel cancer

All parts of the body are made up of tiny cells. Bowel cancer happens when the cells in the bowel grow in an uncontrolled way and form a lump called a tumour.

The place where the cancer first begins to grow is the primary cancer. The primary cancer is named after the place in the body where it started, for example bowel cancer.

Bowel cancer is cancer that affects the colon or the rectum. Bowel cancer is also called colorectal cancer.

Sometimes, bowel cancer cells spread to other parts of the body through the blood and the lymphatic system. This is called secondary cancer.

Bowel cancer is not infectious and cannot be passed on to other people.

Cancer can also affect the small bowel or the anus. These cancers are treated differently to bowel cancer. We have information in English about these types of cancer.

The lymphatic system

The lymphatic system helps protect us from infection and disease. It is made up of fine tubes called lymphatic vessels. These vessels connect to groups of small lymph nodes throughout the body.

There are lymph nodes close to the colon and rectum. Bowel cancer can spread to the lymph nodes close to the bowel.

Stages and grades of bowel cancer

The stage of a cancer means how big it is and if it has spread.

The grade of a cancer is how quickly the cancer may grow.

How treatment is planned

Your healthcare team will meet to plan the best treatment for you. Your doctor or nurse will then talk to you about:

- the stage and grade of the cancer
- your general health
- the treatments and possible side effects
- what you think about the available treatments.

Talking to your healthcare team

It is important to talk about any treatment with your doctor.

Your hospital can arrange an interpreter for you. Let your nurse know if you need one. You may also want to take someone with you who can speak your language and English.

After talking with you, your doctor will usually ask you to sign a form to show that you understand what the treatment means and that you agree to having it. This is called giving your consent. You will not be given treatment unless you have agreed to it.

Questions to ask about your treatment

Here are some questions you might want to ask your cancer team about your treatment:

- What does my diagnosis mean?
- What is the stage and grade of the cancer?
- What will my treatment be?
- What are the benefits, risks and side effects of each treatment?
- How will the treatment affect my daily life?
- Who can I talk to about how I am feeling?

Treatments for bowel cancer

Treatments for bowel cancer include:

- an operation (surgery)
- drugs (chemotherapy, targeted therapy or immunotherapy)
- radiotherapy

Many people have more than one type of treatment, such as an operation and then chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

Surgery

An operation to remove the cancer is the most common treatment for bowel cancer.

Sometimes, very small early-stage bowel cancers can be removed with an operation called a local resection. This is where they remove the cancer using surgical tools passed through the anus. The surgeon does not need to make a cut in the tummy (abdomen).

Most people will have an operation to remove part of the bowel. The surgeon will usually remove the lymph nodes that are near the cancer. This is because cancer cells can spread to lymph nodes near the cancer.

You may have your operation as:

- **open surgery** – this is when the surgeon makes 1 large cut before removing the cancer.
- **keyhole (laparoscopic) surgery** – this means the surgeon makes 4 or 5 small cuts. They put surgical tools through the cuts to remove the cancer. You usually recover more quickly from keyhole surgery than from open surgery.

Types of operation for colon cancer

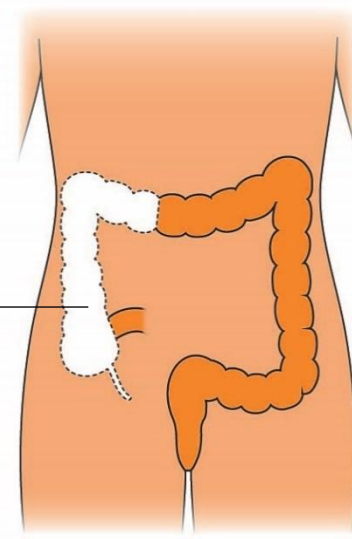
- **Hemi-colectomy** – half of the colon is removed. This may be the right or left side, depending on where the cancer is.
- **Sigmoid colectomy** – the sigmoid colon is removed.

After removing the part of the bowel where the cancer is, the surgeon joins the two ends of the bowel together. Some people may need to have all the colon removed. This is called a total colectomy. Your doctor will tell you more about this if you need this type of operation.



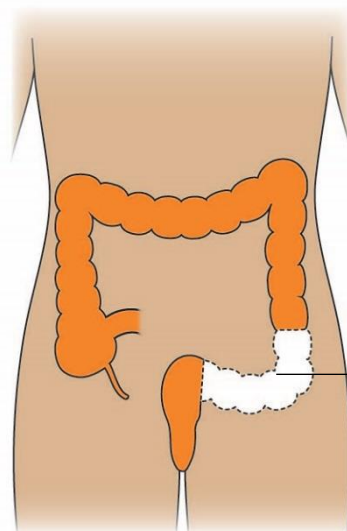
Area removed

Left hemi-colectomy



Area removed

Right hemi-colectomy

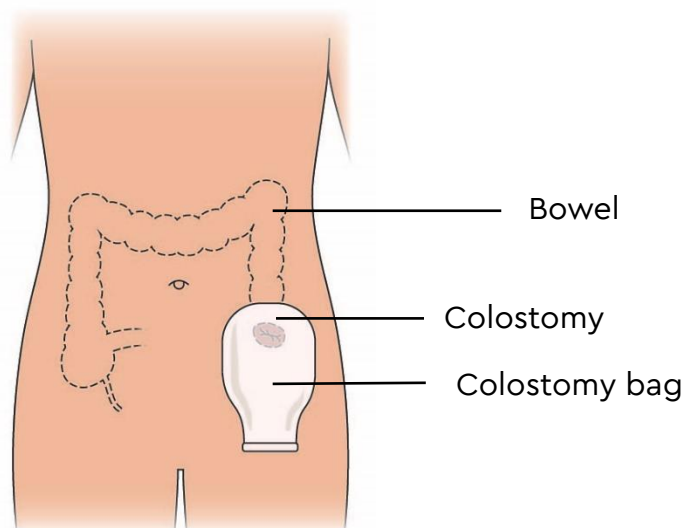


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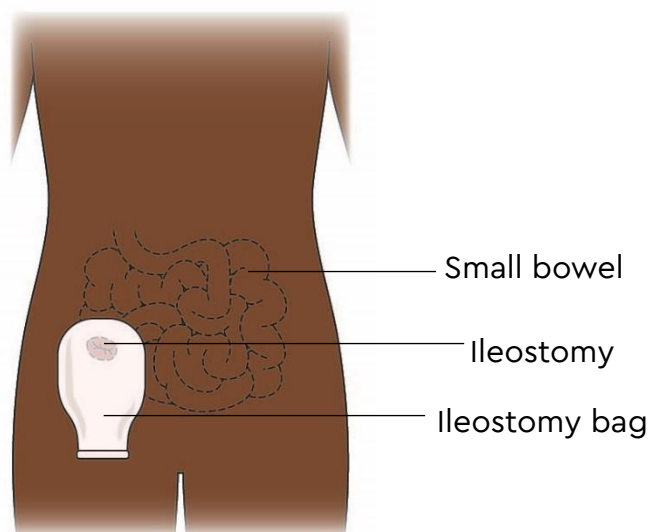
Sigmoid colectomy

Stomas

Some people need to have a stoma. This is when the surgeon connects the end of the bowel to the surface of the tummy (abdomen). You will pass poo (stools) out through the stoma into a special bag you wear. There are different types:



Stoma and stoma bag (colostomy)



Stoma and stoma bag (ileostomy)

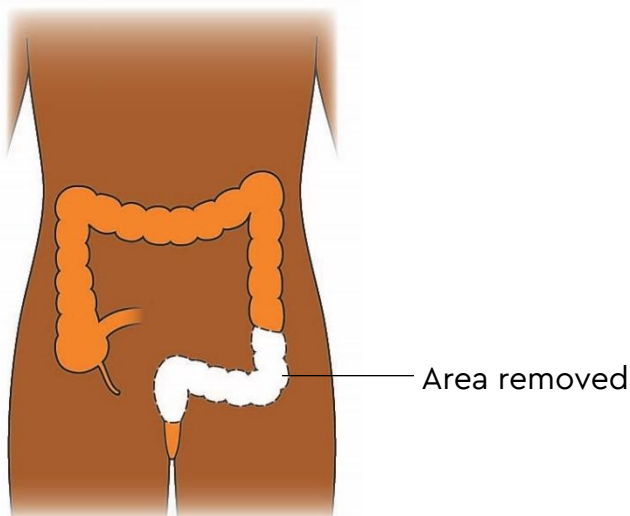
A stoma nurse will show you how to look after the stoma and give you more advice and information. A stoma nurse is a nurse who specialises in stoma care. You may find it helps to talk to someone who has a stoma. Your nurse may be able to arrange this for you. Your nurse will teach you how to manage your stoma at home. You may only need a stoma for a short time after an operation, to allow the bowel to heal. But sometimes it will be permanent. Your doctor can tell you if you may need a stoma and how long you may have it for.

Types of operation for rectal cancer

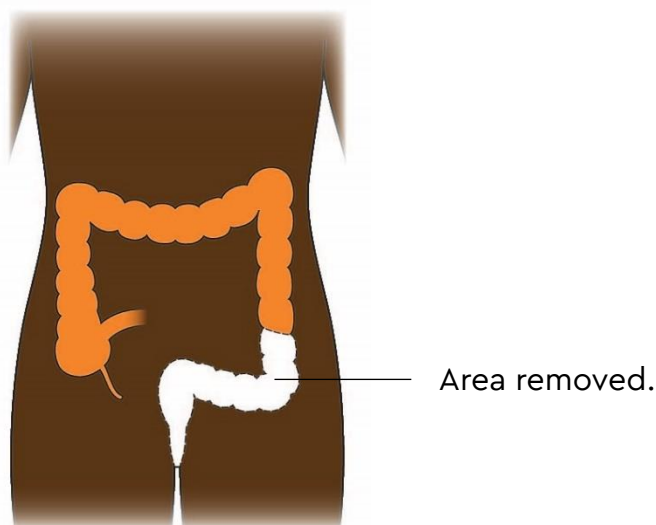
If you have a very small rectal cancer, you may have an operation called a local excision. The cancer can usually be removed through the anus. This means the surgeon does not have to make a cut in your tummy.

You may need a larger operation to remove the cancer and some of the fatty tissue and the lymph nodes around the rectum. There are 2 types of operation:

- **Anterior resection** – the surgeon removes the part of the rectum that is affected by the cancer. They join the two ends of the bowel together.
- **Abdominal perineal resection** – this is usually used for cancers near the anus. The doctor removes the rectum and anus. After this operation, you will have a permanent stoma.



Anterior resection



Abdominal perineal resection

Other types of surgery

Sometimes, the cancer blocks the bowel and stops poo from passing through. This can cause tummy pain and vomiting. The doctor may put a small tube called a stent into the bowel to keep it open. Some people may need to have the blocked part of the bowel removed during an operation.

If the cancer has spread to another part of the body, such as the liver or lungs, you can sometimes have an operation to remove it.

We have more information in your language about surgery and some of the side effects you may have on our website, visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy uses anti-cancer drugs to destroy cancer cells. You do not usually need chemotherapy for early-stage bowel cancer. Chemotherapy may be given:

- after surgery to reduce the risk of cancer coming back
- before surgery, to shrink the cancer and reduce the risk of it coming back
- as the main treatment for cancer that has spread.

Chemotherapy drugs can cause side effects that make you feel unwell. Different drugs can cause different side effects. These include:

- being more likely to get an infection
- feeling tired
- feeling sick or being sick
- diarrhoea – passing more poo than usual, or loose or watery poo
- a sore mouth
- hair loss.

Your doctor can talk to you about the side effects you may have and how to manage them. Most side effects can be controlled with drugs. Most side effects go away when chemotherapy is over.

We have more information about chemotherapy in your language on our website, visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy uses high-energy x-rays to destroy the cancer cells. You do not usually have radiotherapy for colon cancer. It is a common treatment for rectal cancer.

You may have radiotherapy before an operation to remove rectal cancer. It can make the cancer smaller and easier to remove and reduce the risk of the rectal cancer coming back.

After the radiotherapy, you usually wait at least 6 weeks before having surgery. Radiotherapy may be used after an operation if there is a chance that some cancer remains.

If rectal cancer has spread or comes back, you may have radiotherapy to make it smaller. It can also help with symptoms, such as pain.

Side effects of radiotherapy for rectal cancer include:

- tiredness
- changes to your skin
- bowel changes
- bladder changes.

We have more information in your language about radiotherapy and some of the side effects you may have on our website, visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

Chemoradiation

If you have a rectal cancer, you may have chemoradiation. This is when you have chemotherapy and radiotherapy at the same time. It can work better than having either chemotherapy or radiotherapy on their own. Having the treatments together can make the side effects worse.

Targeted therapy

Targeted therapy drugs target something in or around a cancer cell that is helping it grow and survive. Targeted therapies are sometimes used to treat bowel cancers that have spread to other parts of the body.

You may have a targeted therapy drug with chemotherapy. Side effects can vary. They may include:

- dry skin or a rash
- diarrhoea
- feeling sick
- flu symptoms.

Most side effects can be controlled with drugs and go away when treatment is over.

Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy drugs use the immune system to find and attack cancer cells. They may be used to treat bowel cancer that has spread to other parts of the body.

Side effects of immunotherapy include:

- diarrhoea
- skin changes
- joint pains
- feeling tired.

Possible side effects of your treatment

Bowel changes

After treatment, your bowel may work differently for a while. You may:

- have diarrhoea
- need to poo more often
- not get much warning when you need to poo
- have a sore bottom.

These usually improve over time. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have these side effects or if they do not improve. They can give you advice and medicines to help.

Protect your skin

Having loose or watery poo can make the skin around your bottom sore. These tips may help:

- Keep the skin around your bottom clean and dry.
- Use unperfumed wet wipes as they are softer on your skin than toilet paper.
- Use pads and barrier wipes or sprays to help protect your skin. A specialist nurse can advise you about pads and creams to use.
- Wear cotton underwear to keep your skin dry and cool.

Diet changes

Your healthcare team may advise you to follow a specific diet while your bowel recovers from surgery.

For the first few days after surgery, you may be advised to eat a low-fibre diet. Low fibre foods include white bread, white pasta or plain crackers, peeled fruit and vegetables.

Eating at regular times will help your bowel to work more regularly. You may find it easier to eat several small meals a day instead of 1 or 2 large meals.

If you continue to have problems with what you can eat, speak to your nurse or doctor.

Anxiety

Feeling anxious or worried can make your poo looser. Learning how to relax may help your bowel to settle. It is also good for your general health.

Macmillan toilet card

You may worry about going out if you need to use a toilet urgently. It may help to carry a free Macmillan toilet card. You can show this in places such as shops, offices and cafes. We hope it will help you get access to a toilet but it may not work everywhere.

The card is only available in English and reads 'due to my cancer treatment I need urgent access to a toilet. Please can you help?'

You can get one by calling our Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 00 00**.

Or you can order one at orders.macmillan.org.uk

You can also use disabled toilets. They have a wash basin and space to change your clothes. Disabled toilets are sometimes locked. You can buy a key from [Disability Rights UK](https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/).

More information on side effects

We have more information about tiredness and eating problems which you may find helpful. You can find this information online at macmillan.org.uk/translations.

Follow up

After your treatment has finished, you will have regular check-ups and may also have tests. These usually continue for up to 5 years.

If you notice any new symptoms between check-ups, tell your GP, cancer doctor or nurse as soon as possible.

Your feelings

You may feel overwhelmed when you are told you have cancer. You may have many different emotions. There is no right or wrong way to feel. There are many ways to cope with this. Talking to a close friend or relative may help. Your doctor or nurse can help too.

Getting the right care and support for you

If you have cancer and do not speak English, you may be worried that this will affect your cancer treatment and care. But your healthcare team should offer you care, support and information that meets your needs.

We know that sometimes people may face extra challenges in getting the right support. For example, if you work or have a family it can be hard to find time to go to hospital appointments. You might also have worries about money and transport costs. All of this can be stressful and hard to cope with.

We also offer Macmillan Grants to people with cancer. These are one-off payments that can be used for things like hospital parking, travel costs, childcare or heating bills.

How Macmillan can help you

At Macmillan, we know how a cancer diagnosis can affect everything, and we are here to support you.

Macmillan Support Line

We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

We can help with medical questions, give you information about financial support, or be there to listen if you need someone to talk to. The free, confidential phone line is open 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm.

Call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Macmillan website

Our website has lots of information in English about cancer. There is also more information in other languages at [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

We can also arrange translations just for you. Email us at informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk to tell us what you need.

Information centres

Our information and support centres are based in hospitals, libraries and mobile centres. Visit one to get the information you need and speak with someone face to face. Find your nearest centre at [macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Local support groups

At a support group, you can talk to other people affected by cancer. Find out about support groups in your area at [macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Macmillan Online Community

You can talk to other people affected by cancer online at [macmillan.org.uk/community](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/community)

You can access it at any time of day or night. You can share your experiences, ask questions, or just read through people's posts.

More information in your language

We have information in your language about these topics:

Coping with cancer

- Cancer and coronavirus
- Cancer care in the UK
- Claiming benefits when you have cancer
- Eating problems and cancer
- End of life
- Healthcare for refugees and people seeking asylum
- Healthy eating

- Help with costs when you have cancer
- If you are diagnosed with cancer
- LGBTQ+ people and cancer
- Sepsis and cancer
- Side effects of cancer treatment
- Tiredness (fatigue) and cancer

Types of cancer

- Breast cancer
- Cervical cancer
- Large bowel cancer
- Lung cancer
- Prostate cancer

Treatments

- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy
- Surgery

To see this information, go to [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

References and thanks

This information has been written and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been translated into this language by a translation company.

The information included is based on our colon cancer and rectal cancer content available in English on our website.

This information has been reviewed by relevant experts and approved by Senior Medical Editor Dr Paul Ross, Consultant Medical Oncologist.

Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this information.

All our information is based on the best evidence available. For more information about the sources we use, please contact us at informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk

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Next planned review: 2027

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We make every effort to ensure that the information we provide is accurate and up-to-date but it should not be relied upon as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. As far as is permitted by law,

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