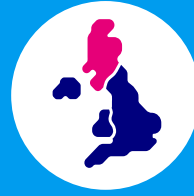


# For health professionals in Scotland

March 2026



## Supporting informed participation in Scotland's bowel cancer screening programme



When you're invited, don't ignore it

### Bowel screening could save your life

With the support of NHS Scotland and Public Health Scotland, Cancer Research UK is running a bowel cancer screening campaign in Scotland from 7 April to 18 May 2026. The campaign aims to increase awareness of bowel cancer screening and support informed participation among eligible adults.

### Why is this campaign needed?

Bowel cancer is the fourth most common cancer in Scotland, with around 4,200 new cases every year – that's 11 every day [1]. The earlier we can diagnose bowel cancer, the easier it is to treat and the better the patient's chance of survival.

Bowel cancer screening aims to prevent bowel cancer through the identification and removal of pre-cancerous polyps or adenomas, and to detect it at an early stage before symptoms develop. In Scotland, people aged between 50 and 74

are invited to participate in bowel cancer screening once every two years\*. However, we know that not everyone who's invited takes part and the reasons for this vary.

The latest data from Public Health Scotland (2022–2024) shows around a third of people (34%) invited for bowel cancer screening don't take part [2].

There are also significant inequalities in uptake, with some groups of people less likely to take part than others. For example, uptake in the most deprived population quintile in Scotland is only 53%, compared to 75% in the least deprived quintile\*\*. Uptake is also lower in men and younger people (aged 50–59) [2]. Further evidence shows lower uptake in several non-White communities [3] and among people with learning disabilities [4].

While taking part in bowel cancer screening is a personal choice, it's essential that everyone has equal access and the opportunity to make an informed decision.

To better understand public attitudes and barriers to bowel cancer screening, our 2024 Cancer Awareness Measure survey collected nationally representative data from across Scotland [5]. The survey identified the five most reported barriers to participation among people in Scotland:

- Not having any symptoms of bowel cancer
- Being frightened of what the test might find
- Being unsure of how to complete the test and worried about getting it wrong
- Finding it too messy to complete the test
- Forgetting to do the test

\*People aged 75 and over can also request to participate in bowel cancer screening by calling the NHS helpline. \*\*As measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.



## Screening is for people without symptoms

Bowel cancer screening detects early signs or pre-cancerous changes before symptoms appear. If someone has possible bowel cancer symptoms, they should be investigated using a symptomatic FIT (faecal immunochemical test), which has a lower threshold for a positive result than the screening FIT. People with symptoms should be assessed even if they've recently been screened.

Learn more at [cruk.org/fit-symptomatic](https://cruk.org/fit-symptomatic)



## Who is the campaign targeting?

The campaign will target people aged 45 to 49 who are approaching eligibility for bowel cancer screening, as well as those aged 50 to 74 who are currently eligible and receive an invitation to participate every two years. The messaging aims to make it clear that bowel cancer screening is for people without symptoms while addressing other barriers to participation.

## How will the campaign be promoted?

The campaign will run from 7 April to 18 May 2026 on TV, radio, out-of-home billboards, social media, regional media, and through the press and relevant partnership activities.

## How will the campaign impact my practice?

You might notice an increase in patients who have questions or concerns about bowel cancer screening, or about possible signs and symptoms of bowel cancer.

## How can you support the campaign?

As primary healthcare professionals, you can play a crucial role in helping eligible people access bowel cancer screening. Here are some top tips and key resources to support you.

- **Promote informed choice** by encouraging eligible individuals to carefully read their invitation and understand the benefits and harms of screening, and by sharing reliable sources of information with patients (see a list of these in the next section).
- **Actively discuss bowel cancer screening** with eligible patients where appropriate. This could be during appointments or regular health checks, such as chronic disease annual reviews. You can find more guidance on how to address barriers to participation in our resources listed below.
- **Give reassurance that most people who take part in bowel cancer screening won't require further tests.** For every 1,000 people screened in Scotland, only around 28 of them have a positive FIT test and require further diagnostic tests [2].
- **Use your practice data or search your practice system to identify and engage with patients who haven't returned their bowel cancer screening test.** You can provide these people with additional support via letters, phone calls and text messages.





## Key resources to support you and your practice

- Explore our [bowel cancer screening hub](#).
- **Sign up to our free webinar**, where you'll hear about inequalities in bowel cancer screening uptake in Scotland and practical steps you can take to address these.

**Date:** 31 March 2026

**Time:** 12-1pm

**Hosted by:** Dr Tasmin Somerfield (Interim Director of Screening, Screening Oversight and Assurance Scotland, NHS National Services Scotland) and Dr Susanne Maxwell (Clinical Academic GP, University of Edinburgh).

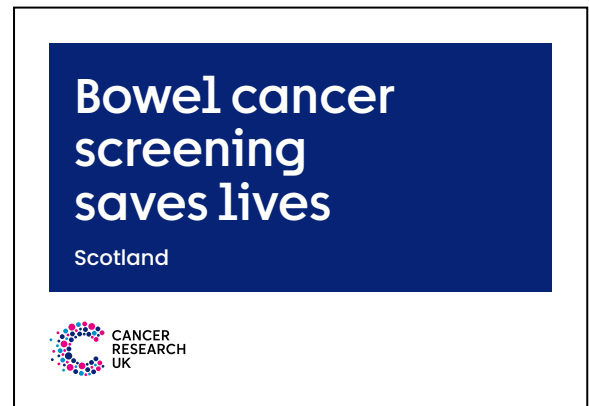
- Download our [bowel cancer screening primary care good practice guide](#) for tips on addressing inequalities and barriers to participation. The guide also includes telephone, letter and text scripts to support engagement with non-responders.
- Visit [Public Health Scotland's webpage](#) to find more resources for healthcare professionals.
- Complete GatewayC's Bowel Cancer Screening [online course](#).
- Visit [Doctors.net.uk Bowel cancer screening hub](#) for more interactive learning and resources.

## Resources for patients

Direct patients to call the free **NHS bowel cancer screening helpline** on **0800 0121 833** for more information or to request a new test kit.

Patients can visit the [NHS Inform Scotland bowel screening webpage](#) for information on how to complete the test kit that's available in multiple languages and easy read formats.

Order our wallet-sized **'How to complete your bowel screening kit'** guides for patients (free print and delivery).



## Stay connected

Visit [cruk.org/hp-newsletters](https://cruk.org/hp-newsletters) to sign up for our Cancer Update for GPs e-newsletter and receive more guidance, practical tools and expert resources tailored to GPs and practice teams in Scotland.



**"GPs can help patients feel confident about bowel screening with opportunistic, open and supportive conversations that empower informed decisions. We hope you'll join us in supporting more people across Scotland to participate in bowel screening in an informed way."**

Dr Douglas Rigg, Joint Clinical Lead Scottish Primary Care Cancer Group

## References

- [1] Cancer Research UK. Bowel cancer incidence statistics (ICD10 C18–C20) in Scotland for 2018–2019 and 2021. Calculated by the Cancer Intelligence team. Similar data available at <http://www.cruk.org/cancerstats>
- [2] Public Health Scotland. **Scottish bowel screening programme statistics May 2022–April 2024**. Accessed December 2025.
- [3] Campbell C, Douglas A, Williams L, Cezard G et al. **Are there ethnic and religious variations in uptake of bowel cancer screening? A retrospective cohort study among 1.7 million people in Scotland**. BMJ Open. 2020.
- [4] Osborn DP, Horsfall L, Hassiotis A, Petersen I, Walters K, Nazareth I. **Access to cancer screening in people with learning disabilities in the UK: cohort study in the health improvement network, a primary care research database**. PLoS One. 2012.
- [5] Whitelock V. **Cancer Research UK’s 2024 Cancer Awareness Measure ‘Plus’ (CAM+)**. 2024.



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