

For community pharmacists 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 in Scotland 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 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, encourage them to see their GP. They'll likely use 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



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.

Why are we asking community pharmacists to support the campaign?

Community pharmacists play a key role in supporting informed participation by raising awareness of bowel cancer screening and directing people to reliable sources of information. You can serve as an accessible source of information, especially for people experiencing mobility and transport issues or difficulty getting a GP appointment. That's why we're providing community pharmacists with resources and information to help you address any questions you receive as a result of the campaign.

How can you support the campaign?

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

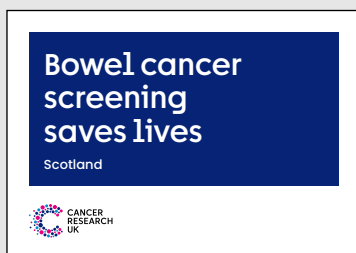
- **Tell your wider pharmacy teams about the campaign**, as they're a key point of contact for patients and customers.
- **Help people understand that bowel cancer screening is for people without symptoms.** It's important to encourage people experiencing symptoms to contact their GP practice.
- **Signpost people to reliable sources of information** on screening (we've listed some in the next section).
- **Share our wallet-sized guides** to make sure eligible people have the right information to make an informed choice about participating in screening.
- **Be aware that some individuals face barriers** that make it more difficult for them to access bowel cancer screening. These could include language difficulties, trouble understanding screening information, fear of results or previous negative experiences.

Key resources to support you and your pharmacy

- Explore our **bowel cancer screening hub** for more information and resources.
- Visit the **BOPA cancerHUB webpage** for free bite-sized learning and resources.

Resources for patients

- Order free copies of our **bowel cancer screening wallet card** to give to people and display in your pharmacy.
- 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 **nhsinform.scot/bowelscreening** for information on how to complete the test kit that's available in multiple languages and easy read formats.



References

- [1] Cancer Research UK. Bowel cancer incidence statistics (ICD10 C18-C20) in Scotland for 2017-2019 and 2021. Calculated by the Cancer Intelligence team. Similar data available at **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.



If you have any comments about this document, please contact **health.marketing@cancer.org.uk**