

SCOPE IT OUT!

Averlyn Lim uncovers the importance of keeping your bowels moving.

Half of us might not know the name of one of the world's leading causes of death, which is also the third deadliest cancer in Malaysia. Shocked? Colorectal cancer, or bowel cancer as it's more commonly known, doesn't get as much press as other cancers, so it's not surprising if you've never heard of it.

Dr Christina Ng Van Tze, a consultant medical oncologist, says bowel cancer is a cancer of the colon and rectum. "It is caused by the uncontrolled growth of cells that line the inner wall of your large intestine," she explains.

Dr Andy Easwaren Vasudevan, a gastroenterologist from Columbia Asia hospital, adds that these tiny growths are called polyps. "Not all polyps become cancerous but some may, over time. They can narrow and block the bowel or cause bleeding. In more advanced cases, the cancer can spread beyond the bowel to other organs." As the risk of being diagnosed with bowel cancer only increases after the age of 50, most people are not aware of its symptoms until the cancer has spread. "However, the reason why bowel cancer is strongly related

to age is (still) not clearly explained in medical literature," says Dr Ng.

Other risk factors associated with bowel cancer include previous incidences of inflammatory bowel disease, family history, and a genetic condition inherited from your parents. However, Dr Ng warns that in most cases the disease has no obvious or clear cause, so even people who do not fit the criteria above could develop it.

Amna bt. A. Hamid was 56 when she was diagnosed with bowel cancer, after suffering from an upset stomach and diarrhoea for almost a whole year. "I always thought I had a weak gut or that I ate something wrong. I was eventually diagnosed with stage-three bowel cancer although no one else in my family has a history of bowel cancer or any bowel disorders."

The good news: doctors agree that bowel cancer is preventable with a few key lifestyle changes. From simple diet tweaks to regular check-ups, here are four ways you can lower your cancer risk.

1. EAT 'CLEAN' FIBRE

"A healthy diet generally helps in preventing bowel cancer," says Dr Vasudevan. Recent research by the World Cancer Research Fund linked

"Fibre speeds up food's movement through your digestive system, so any carcinogens consumed are diluted and have minimal contact with the colon lining."



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foods that are high in natural fibre to protection against bowel cancer. The European Prospective Investigation in Cancer (EPIC) has also found that people who ate the most fibre are least likely to have bowel cancer. "Fibre speeds up food's movement through your digestive system, so any carcinogens consumed are diluted and have minimal contact with the colon lining," he explains.

FRUITS & VEGGIES

"While there isn't a 'superfood' that protects against cancer, fruits and vegetables generally contain varying amounts of fibre, vitamins, antioxidants

and phytochemicals. These can help reduce your risk of developing certain cancers," says Dr Ng.

RED MEAT

"A diet high in red meats (beef, lamb, pork, liver) and processed meats (commercial sausages and luncheon meat) can increase your cancer risk. Moreover, high-temperature cooking such as frying, boiling or grilling creates chemicals that might increase cancer risk – but it's not clear by how much," says Dr Vasudevan. Consider saving red meat for special occasions and switching to lightly-cooked fish or chicken instead.

8 OUT OF 10
(80%)
people who get
**BOWEL
CANCER**
are aged
60 and over.

2. GET TESTED

“Going for a screening test is one of the most effective ways to prevent colon cancer,” says Dr Ng. “Even in cases where cancer has already developed, early detection and surgical removal of the cancer before it spreads significantly improves prognosis,” she adds. It’s usually recommended for those who are 50 years and above, but get it done earlier if you have a family history of bowel cancer or suffer from inflammatory bowel syndrome. Dr Ng explains three common screening methods:

ANNUAL FAECAL OCCULT BLOOD TESTING

This test detects tiny amounts of blood in the stool, if the cancer or polyps has started bleeding. If blood is detected, other tests should be done to confirm the source of bleeding.

FLEXIBLE SIGMOIDOSCOPY

Done every three to five years, doctors will examine the rectum and lower colon for irregularities using a viewing tube.

COLONOSCOPY

Patients with a high risk of bowel cancer may undergo colonoscopies every three to five years before the age of 50. Tissue samples from the test will be taken (biopsy) and sent to the laboratory for further assessment.

WATCH THE SIGNS

Bowel cancer’s symptoms can be similar to those of other bowel diseases, such as inflammatory bowel disease. Consult with a doctor if you experience any of these.

- ✓ Bleeding from the back passage (rectum) or blood in your stools.
- ✓ Diarrhoea or looser stools, lasting for more than four to six weeks.
- ✓ A lump in your back passage or abdomen, more commonly on the right side. Usually detected by a doctor.
- ✓ A sense of fullness in your back passage, even when you don’t need the toilet.
- ✓ Unexplained weight loss.
- ✓ Weight loss due to lack of appetite, bloating or queasiness.
- ✓ Pain in your abdomen or back passage.
- ✓ Anaemia (a low level of red blood cells) caused by internal bleeding, which can lead to fatigue and occasional breathlessness.

THE GOOD STUFF

ADD THESE TO YOUR DAILY DIET FOR HEALTHY BOWEL MOVEMENTS.



• OATS

Certain fibres help carry bile acids – that could potentially cause cancer – through the bowel more quickly, thus flushing them out before they wreak havoc.



• LEAFY GREENS

A diet rich in folate is linked to a lower risk of bowel cancer. This B vitamin is found in green and leafy vegetables.



• YOGURT

Studies show it prevents cancer by accelerating bowel movement. It’s an excellent source of calcium too.

Most polyps take
5 to 10
years to develop into
BOWEL CANCER.

3. EXERCISE

Several studies have found that people who do high levels of physical activity can lower their risk of bowel cancer by a third. Every bit counts, whether it’s walking around your neighbourhood park or climbing the stairs of your double-storey house. Reports have also shown that overweight and obese people are more likely to develop polyps, putting them at higher risk of cancer.

4. DRINK LESS ALCOHOL

The risk of bowel cancer increases by 15 per cent in people who drink 12.5 units of alcohol per week – and increases the more you drink, reports Cancer Research UK. While shaking off bad habits may be difficult, it’s not impossible. Dr Vasudevan suggests limiting your alcohol intake; if you’re at an event, have just one drink. 