



This factsheet is part of a series on specific health risks for people living with mental health conditions. It draws on Equally Well's national monitoring report, [Unequally Unwell](#). There is an 11-year life expectancy gap for people living with mental illness – two-thirds of these deaths are potentially preventable.¹

About bowel cancer

Bowel cancer, also known as colorectal, colon, or rectal cancer, develops from the inner lining of the bowel.² Incidence of colon cancer is increasing in Australia, especially in people under 50 years old.³

The health inequity

In people living with mental health conditions, bowel cancers cause:

- over 900 premature^a deaths per year¹, and
- more than 500 of these deaths are 'potentially preventable'.¹



People with mental health conditions are:

4x

more likely to die prematurely from bowel cancer¹

7x

more likely to die prematurely from bowel cancer if under 55 years old.¹

Bowel cancer screening saves lives

[Screening](#) involves a simple at-home test for people who do not have obvious symptoms of disease, and may detect early signs.

Delaying screening and follow-up tests may result in cancer being diagnosed at later stages, leading to lower survival rates.



People aged 50-74 are automatically sent a bowel screening test. If aged over 45 years, you can also [request a kit online](#).

However, people with a mental illness are significantly *less likely* to:

- complete a bowel screening test^{4,5}
- complete the test correctly^{4,5}
- receive a follow-up colonoscopy after a positive test result.^{4,5}

^aFor ages 15-75 years; these figures are doubled when considering all ages.

There are ways we can work together to promote bowel health for people living with mental health conditions.

Look after yourself

- **Order** a bowel screening test kit
 - from your GP or health professional
 - [request a screening kit online](#)
 - or call 1800 627 701.
- **Familiarise** yourself with the [common symptoms and early warning signs](#).
- **Ask** your relatives about any family history of bowel cancer.
- **Explore** opportunities to be more physically active, eat healthy, and reduce alcohol and smoking.
- **Equip** yourself with the Equally Well [consumer resource](#) to plan the physical healthcare you want.

How to help others

- **Ask** if they have completed, and returned their bowel cancer screening test.
- **Advise** about the bowel screening support options available, and the benefits of a healthy lifestyle.
- **Assist** with ordering a screening kit, and support them to schedule and attend GP appointments.
- **Share** this factsheet widely.

Activate your workplace

- **Promote** staff awareness of increased risk of bowel cancer for people with mental illness.
- **Bulk order** testing kits to give out at appointments as needed.
- **Encourage** proactive screening and treatment.
- **Implement** targeted healthy lifestyle programs tailored for people with mental health challenges.

Everyone can play a role to advocate for healthcare equity. Access to quality physical healthcare is a basic human right for everyone – keep asking until you and the people you support get the care deserved.

Every day in Australia 46 people with mental illness die of preventable health conditions¹.

If we share the responsibility, we can ensure that one of these 46 is not someone we know and care for.

“Do what you can,
where you can,
when you can.”

Further information

The Unequally Unwell report¹ examined the premature mortality and preventable deaths for people living with mental health conditions, defined as the number of deaths in a section of the population above that expected based on the total population death rates (as defined by OECD⁷).

Links *[click or scan]*



[Unequally Unwell Summary Report](#)



[Full Report](#)



[Full list of references](#)

About Equally Well

Equally Well is a collective of over 100 organisations committed to the physical health of people living with mental illness. The Equally Well initiative is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care.



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