



On average, people living with mental health conditions **die 11 years earlier than the rest of the population.**

Two-thirds of these deaths are **preventable**¹ by accessing freely available services.

We can change this!

The health inequity

People with mental health conditions are **4 times more likely to die prematurely** from bowel cancer, and if under 55 years old the risk is 7 times greater.¹

For people with mental health conditions, bowel cancer causes:

- Over 900 premature deaths^a per year.¹
- And over 500 (10 per week) of these deaths are potentially preventable.¹



Bowel cancer screening saves lives^b

Bowel cancer survival rate is 72%.
If detected early it is close to 100%.

People with a mental health condition 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}

! Only **1 in 4** people with a mental health condition complete a bowel screening test.^{4,5}

Don't delay. Do it today.

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

Delaying screening leads to lower survival rates.

If aged over 45 years, you can [request a kit online](#).



Access to quality physical health care is a basic human right!

Keep asking until you and the people you support get the care they deserve.

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*, and other relevant research.

Every day in Australia, **46 people** with mental health conditions **die of preventable** physical health conditions.¹

We can all help to improve health and save lives of people living with mental health conditions



Looking after yourself

- **Get a bowel screening test kit** from your GP, or [request a screening kit online](#) or by calling 1800 627 701.
- **Familiarise** yourself with the [common symptoms](#) and early warning signs.
- **Ask** your relatives about any history of bowel cancer.
- **Explore** opportunities to be more physically active, eat healthy, and reduce alcohol and smoking.
- **Equip** yourself with the [Taking Charge of your Care resource](#) to plan your physical healthcare.



Helping 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. Ask if you can put in on noticeboards, libraries, GP reception rooms and staff rooms.



Workplace & network

- **Promote** staff awareness of increased risk of bowel cancer for people with mental health conditions.
- **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.

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 OECD²).

About bowel cancer

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

More information is available at [Cancer Council](#), [Cancer Australia](#), or [Bowel Cancer Australia](#).

About Equally Well

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

Links *[click or scan]*



[Unequally Unwell
Summary Report](#)



[Full Report](#)



[Equally Well](#)

^a Premature is defined as between the age of 15 to 74 years.

^b Please note, this information is not a substitute for professional medical advice.



Factsheet #4

Bowel cancer and mental health

1. Roberts R, Wong A, Lawn S, Lawrence D, Johnson C. Mortality of people using Australian Government-funded mental health services and prescription medications: Analysis of 2016 Census, death registry, MBS and PBS data. 2024.
2. Cancer Council. Types of Cancer: Bowel cancer 2025 [Available from: <https://www.cancer.org.au/cancer-information/types-of-cancer/bowel-cancer>].
3. Meyers AL, Dowty JG, Mahmood K, et al. Age-specific trends in colorectal, appendiceal, and anal tumour incidence by histological subtype in Australia from 1990 to 2020: a population-based time-series analysis. medRxiv. 2025:2025.04. 21.25326138.
4. Kisely S, Seth R, Jordan SJ, et al. Participation in the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program by people with severe mental illness, Australia, 2006–2019: a national data linkage study. Med J Aust. 2024;221:617-22.
5. Kisely S, Spilsbury K, Bull C, et al. Rates of colorectal cancer diagnosis and mortality in people with severe mental illness: results from Australia's National Bowel Cancer Screening Programme. Epidemiol Psychiatr Sci. 2024;33:e79.
6. Cancer Australia. Bowel cancer (Colorectal cancer) in Australia statistics 2025 [Available from: <https://www.canceraustralia.gov.au/cancer-types/bowel-cancer/bowel-cancer-colorectal-cancer-australia-statistics>].
7. Bowel Cancer Australia. [Available from: <https://www.bowelcanceraustralia.org/bowel-cancer/bowel-cancer-facts/>].
8. OECD. "Excess mortality", in Health at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators. Paris: OECD Publishing; 2021.