Colonoscopy – After a positive Faecal Occult Blood Test

If you have participated in the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBCSP) and your faecal occult blood test has come back with a positive result, you will be advised to visit your doctor.

A positive FOBT result means blood has been detected in your sample. About one in 14 people will have a positive FOBT result. Bleeding may be caused by a number of conditions, including polyps, haemorrhoids or inflammation, and may not necessarily be cancer related. However the bleeding needs to be investigated and if blood is detected, you should contact your doctor to discuss the results.

Your doctor will likely advise you on important follow-up tests for your positive FOBT, such as a colonoscopy. If you need to have a colonoscopy, your doctor will explain the procedure and tell you about any risks. It is rare for a colonoscopy to cause serious problems.

What is a colonoscopy?

A colonoscopy is a test that allows a specialist to look at the inside of the bowel. It examines the whole length of the large bowel. This is the best, most accurate test to examine the large bowel for cancer in most people.

How long does it take?

A colonoscopy takes about 20 to 30 minutes and is usually done in a hospital or day clinic. You’ll need to have someone take you home after the colonoscopy, as you may feel drowsy or weak.

Do I have to do any preparation?

Yes, in the days before a colonoscopy, there will be some dietary restrictions. Then, you’ll have a bowel preparation to clean your bowel. This generally occurs the day before the colonoscopy and you will be required to drink a special liquid preparation to help empty the bowel.

Each hospital/clinic will advise you of their preparation requirements.

What is actually involved?

On the day of the procedure, you’ll probably be given an anaesthetic so you don’t feel any discomfort or pain. This will also make you drowsy and may put you to sleep during the examination.

The specialist will insert a narrow, flexible tube, with a camera on the end, into your back passage (anus). This tube is called a colonoscope and it will pass from your anus up into your rectum and colon. It allows the specialist to look for polyps or bowel cancers. Most polyps can be removed during the colonoscopy.

Air will be pumped into your colon, and your doctor will look for abnormal tissue (such as polyps), which will be removed for further examination (biopsy).
Are there any side effects?
The main side effect of a colonoscopy is temporary flatulence and wind pain, which is due to air pumped into the large bowel during the test. More serious but rare complications include damage to the bowel or bleeding. Your doctor will talk to you about the risks. Overall, the test is safe and the benefits far outweigh the risks for most people.

How much does a colonoscopy cost?
The costs will vary depending on whether you have the colonoscopy as a public or private patient. Public hospital patients are not charged. The cost for private patients will depend on their level of private health cover, and any additional fees charged.

How long will I have to wait for a colonoscopy?
Public hospital patients often have to wait several weeks or sometimes months for the procedure. Ensure your doctor makes note on your referral that you are a NBCSP participant with a positive FOBT – this way you may be given priority. Private patients usually have a shorter wait. The Ambulatory Surgery Initiative (ASI) has been developed to shorten the wait list in Western Australia. Visit http://www.gp.health.wa.gov.au/asi/home/ for further information and a list of participating specialists.

For more information contact Cancer Council on 13 11 20