



On a mission

Making sure bowel cancer is diagnosed early to save lives



Bowel Cancer UK
Beating bowel cancer together



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Introduction

from Genevieve Edwards, CEO and Richard Anderson, Chair of Bowel Cancer UK

Every 30 minutes someone in the UK dies of bowel cancer. It's the UK's fourth most common cancer, and the second biggest cancer killer. Yet it doesn't have to be this way. If diagnosed early, it's treatable and curable – when diagnosed at stage 1, 9 in 10 people will survive for five years or more. But when diagnosed at stage 4, the disease is harder to treat, and this plummets to 1 in 10.

It's a stark reality that too many people in the UK are diagnosed too late. Fewer than 4 in 10 people are diagnosed at the early stages (stages 1 and 2). Almost half of people are diagnosed at the later stages (stage 3 and 4). Shockingly, more than 1 in 5 people in England are diagnosed in emergency settings, and for the under 50s, that number rises to more 1 in 4.

Simply put, to see more people surviving and thriving beyond bowel cancer, we must diagnose people at the earliest stages.

We've consulted with patients, volunteers, clinicians and researchers to develop a new strategy to deliver this stage shift towards early diagnosis. This new strategy will run for five years from 2023 to 2028.

We know that awareness of symptoms needs to be higher, that people need to act on those symptoms quickly, and that GPs need support to make faster referrals for the right patients. We also know that the NHS needs additional capacity to identify those at higher risk of bowel cancer and to diagnose people sooner.

Bowel Cancer UK has a vital part to play in making this happen. We don't pretend that this will be easy, but we have three things in our favour: a talented and determined team with the vision to make early diagnosis a reality, wonderful partners at our side – other charities, clinical and scientific colleagues, politicians and policymakers – and our corporate supporters, trusts, and unstoppable fundraisers. And at the heart of everything we do, is the bowel cancer community, campaigning, volunteering, fundraising and helping us make better decisions based on their priorities.

We want to see a future where nobody dies of bowel cancer. It's an ambitious goal, and one we're determined to achieve.



Our vision

A future where nobody dies of bowel cancer.

Our mission

We're determined to save lives and improve the quality of life of everyone affected by bowel cancer. We support and fund targeted research, provide expert information and support to patients and their families, educate the public and professionals about the disease, and campaign for early diagnosis and access to the best treatment and care.



In the clinic, I see first-hand the seismic impact that a stage 4 diagnosis has for patients and their families. Bowel Cancer UK's bold new focus on early diagnosis will result in seeing fewer people with advanced disease, making bowel cancer the treatable and survivable cancer it should be.

Mr Stephen W Fenwick, Consultant Hepatobiliary Surgeon, Liverpool University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust



Our context

If everyone with bowel cancer was diagnosed at the early stages, 28,000 people each year could have more time with loved ones, kinder treatments, and a better outcome.

Things must change, and fast. We won't rest until we make early diagnosis a reality for bowel cancer patients.

The change we want to see:

Now



Fewer than 4 in 10 people diagnosed at stages 1 and 2

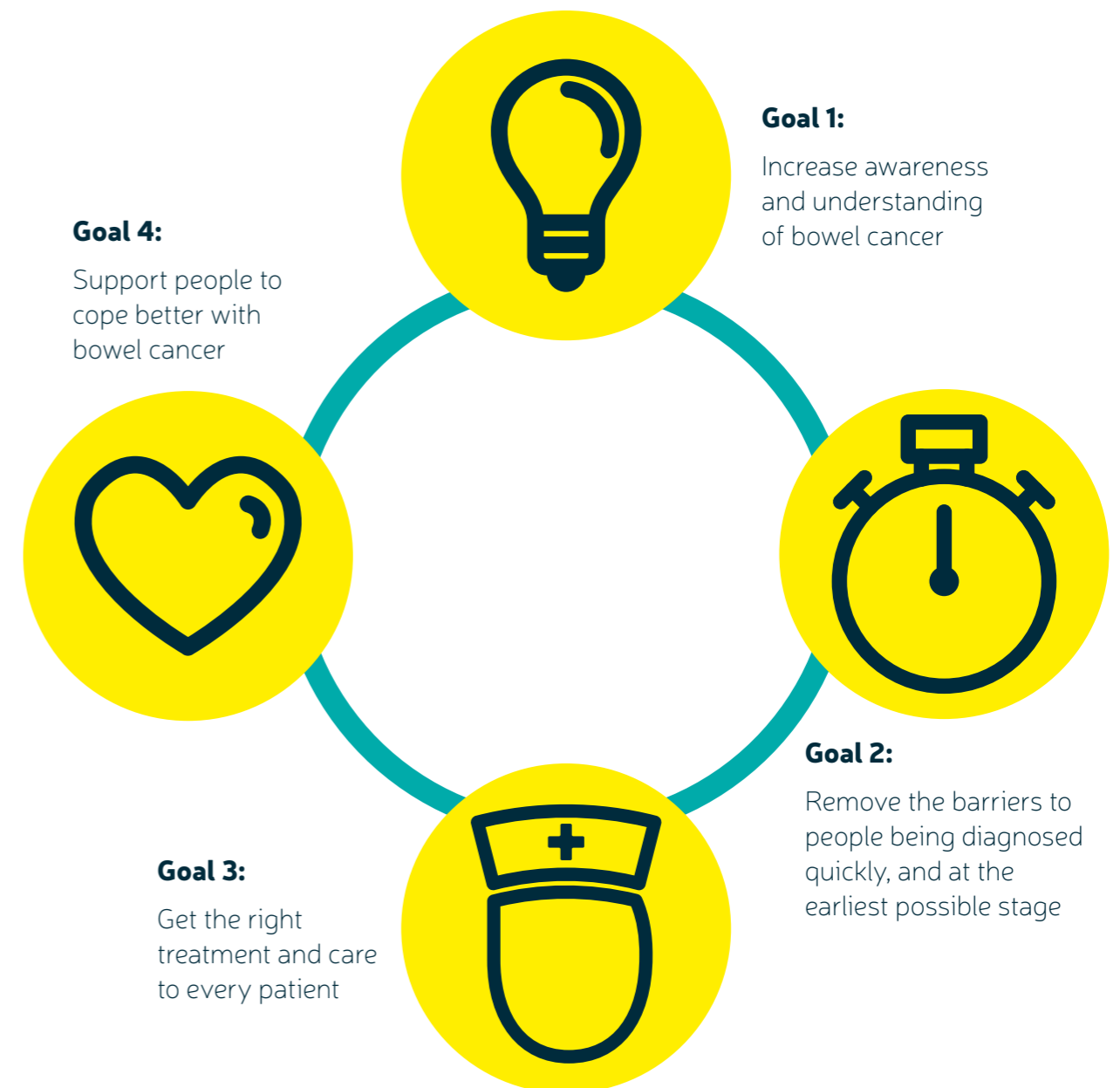
2028



More than 7 in 10 people diagnosed at stages 1 and 2

Our plan

There are four goals that form the building blocks of our new strategy.





Increase awareness and understanding of bowel cancer

In the UK, fewer than 6 in 10 people can name a single symptom of bowel cancer, according to our research carried out in 2022. We also know that people experiencing worrying symptoms like blood in their poo will often wait several months before talking to their GP. Delays in seeking help are contributing to some bowel cancers being diagnosed at the later stages when they're harder to treat successfully.

Goal 1

How we'll achieve this

We'll launch a multi-year national symptoms campaign, coupled with a targeted UK-wide roadshow, to take the signs and symptoms of bowel cancer directly to communities hardest hit by poor outcomes from the disease.

We'll deliver a volunteer-led awareness programme, offering talks online and in-person as well as providing awareness information and resources across the UK.

We'll bring patients and politicians together through our campaigning work, ensuring those with the power to make positive change hear directly from those with lived experience.

We'll work in partnership with politicians to keep bowel cancer high on the political agenda across the four nations of the UK, from securing national cancer strategies to increasing the cancer workforce.

We'll use our platforms to raise the voices of people affected by bowel cancer, and work with the media to shine a powerful light on their experiences, vital red flag symptoms and our health information.

While not everyone with bowel cancer experiences symptoms – and these symptoms can also be caused by other conditions – for those that do, swift action to rule out bowel cancer first and fast is vital.

In recent years, GPs have been able to offer people with symptoms a test to do at home to help triage those most likely to need further investigations. This is likely to have two significant effects: it could reduce the pressure for colonoscopies (the tests needed to diagnose bowel cancer), by making sure that the right patients are referred; and the simplicity of a home test could make it easier to overcome patients' reluctance to talk about their symptoms with their GP.

The use of these home tests by GPs is rising encouragingly, and this gives us the confidence to run our first national symptoms behaviour change programme to encourage and reassure people to take prompt action.

Our research also tells us that some communities are harder hit by bowel cancer than others. We need to do more in these areas, and we'll commit to our first ever targeted outreach programme for people in areas with low uptake of screening, poor bowel cancer outcomes, and greater health inequalities.

The bowel cancer community is a vibrant force for change, and we must work together with politicians across the UK to make bowel cancer survival a priority, and improve the bowel cancer pathway from screening, diagnostics, treatment and support.



Remove the barriers to people being diagnosed quickly, and at the earliest possible stage

We know that patients sometimes delay seeking help for symptoms, and when they do, they can face barriers to getting swift answers. The 'red flag' symptoms of bowel cancer can also be caused by other more common conditions, which are often explored first, causing delays in diagnosing bowel cancer.

Goal 2

Bowel cancer is the fourth most common cancer, but it's rarer in the under 50s. Many GPs may never see a younger person with bowel cancer during their entire career, so we must support GPs to help them find the 'needles in the haystack' faster.

Although bowel cancer is far more common in older adults, the numbers of under 50s being diagnosed is rising. We need to understand what's driving this, and find ways to reverse the trend, and better meet the needs of younger patients when they are diagnosed.

Many people with bowel cancer symptoms use pharmacies to manage symptoms like constipation or diarrhoea. In 2022 we rolled out a successful pilot programme in Wales with community pharmacies to raise symptoms awareness among customers, and support pharmacy staff to encourage those customers to speak to their GPs. We'll extend this programme further to other nations in the UK and explore working with a significant retail partner who can help us reach those most at risk in their local communities.

For those who are at high risk of developing bowel cancer, like people with Lynch syndrome (a genetic condition that can increase the lifetime risk of bowel cancer to up to 80%), it's vitally important they receive coordinated, timely and high-quality care and are offered interventions that reduce their risk. Our work for Lynch syndrome patients has resulted in national clinical guidance on genetic testing, and as of June 2023, surveillance colonoscopies have become the responsibility of the Bowel Cancer Screening Programme in England. However, there still remains so much to do.

We're fortunate to have screening programmes for bowel cancer across the UK, and we know that people diagnosed through screening generally have much better outcomes. However, just 1 in 10 bowel cancers are diagnosed this way. We'll work with the NHS to make screening more sensitive so it can diagnose more cancers earlier, in some cases prevent it from developing in the first place, and lower the eligible age to 50 across the UK.

Currently, 1 in 5 people with bowel cancer in England are diagnosed in emergency settings. For the under 50s, this rises to one in four. For these patients, their bowel cancers are often advanced, meaning they are harder to treat successfully. We need research to understand why this happens, and crucially, what we can do to diagnose these patients earlier and save more lives.

How we'll achieve this

We'll develop an extensive programme of primary care and pharmacy education, ensuring healthcare professionals have everything they need to triage and refer people with symptoms.

We'll ensure our research programme is focused on the issues that will have the greatest impact on earlier diagnosis, supported by an ambitious new research strategy.

We'll campaign across the UK for vital improvements to bowel cancer screening programmes, for GPs to have the tools to refer the right patients quickly, and for people at high risk of bowel cancer to be identified and screened regularly.



Get the right treatment and care to every patient

Advances in genomics and personalised care have led to better understanding of tumours, more effective tests, and treatments which lead to better outcomes for patients. But there's more to do to ensure that everyone receives the correct diagnosis and the best treatment and care.

Goal 3

How we'll achieve this

We'll develop a patient and carer support service, helping patients at every step of their bowel cancer journey with information and support to understand their diagnosis, treatment, and the options open to them.

We'll work with regulators across the UK to ensure that patients have access to new treatments and innovations through the NHS, regardless of where they live.

We'll create the UK's first Bowel Cancer Surgical Research Academy – a virtual centre of excellence for developing and supporting much needed surgical research across the UK.

Surgery to treat bowel cancer can be lifesaving, but it can also leave lasting effects that affect people's quality of life. We've funded research into better, kinder surgery for people with bowel cancer, and through that investment, leveraged £9m of extra funding for surgical research in England. With more to invest in surgical research, we will accelerate progress for all patients. We'll also work with clinical colleagues to improve access to support services for those struggling to cope with the effects of their bowel cancer treatment.

We're very proud to be a part of the vibrant, supportive bowel cancer community – patients, clinicians and researchers, all striving for each and every patient today, and to secure improvements for patients in the future. We're ambitious for our community and know we're stronger together, so we'll continue to advocate for better treatment and care for patients in our four nations.

There have been real advances in the diagnosis and treatment of bowel cancer in recent years and we are proud of the part we've been able to play in making this happen. We must harness the potential of genomics and personalised care and support for every patient in the years ahead.



Support people to cope better with bowel cancer

Being diagnosed with bowel cancer can be frightening and confusing. Understanding a cancer diagnosis and the available treatment options at each stage of a bowel cancer journey can have a real impact on the decisions a patient makes, their outcomes and their emotional wellbeing. We know that those close to someone with bowel cancer also need support and information to cope.

Goal 4

We've always been there every step of the way for everyone affected by bowel cancer with expert information, advice and support. We'll continue to find better ways to support more patients when they need us the most, both UK-wide and at community level, and make it easier and faster for people to access our services.

How we'll achieve this

We'll invest in developing our high-quality health information to be the go-to resource for healthcare professionals and patients looking for information about bowel cancer.

We'll grow our peer support network including our online forum and Facebook groups, build a UK-wide network of local face-to-face support groups and patient advocates, and set up a peer support telephone service.

We'll expand our patient event programme, finding new ways to reach people and provide support on the topics important to them.

We'll continue to expand our nurse-led services to offer clinical support and information to patients.

We'll continue to grow our bowel cancer nurses network providing education and training to help them support patients and their families.

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The way I see it, doing the screening test for bowel cancer is a win-win situation. If you're all-clear then you have peace of mind, but if you do happen to need further investigation, then at least you'll be advised on what your best options are going forward and can begin treatment.

Bowel cancer treatment has a greater chance of success the earlier you detect an issue. So ensuring as many people as possible take their screening test when offered is really important.

Steve was diagnosed in 2022 after completing a screening test

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Investing in success

To make this strategy a reality, we'll need to invest in creating strong foundations for our organisation.

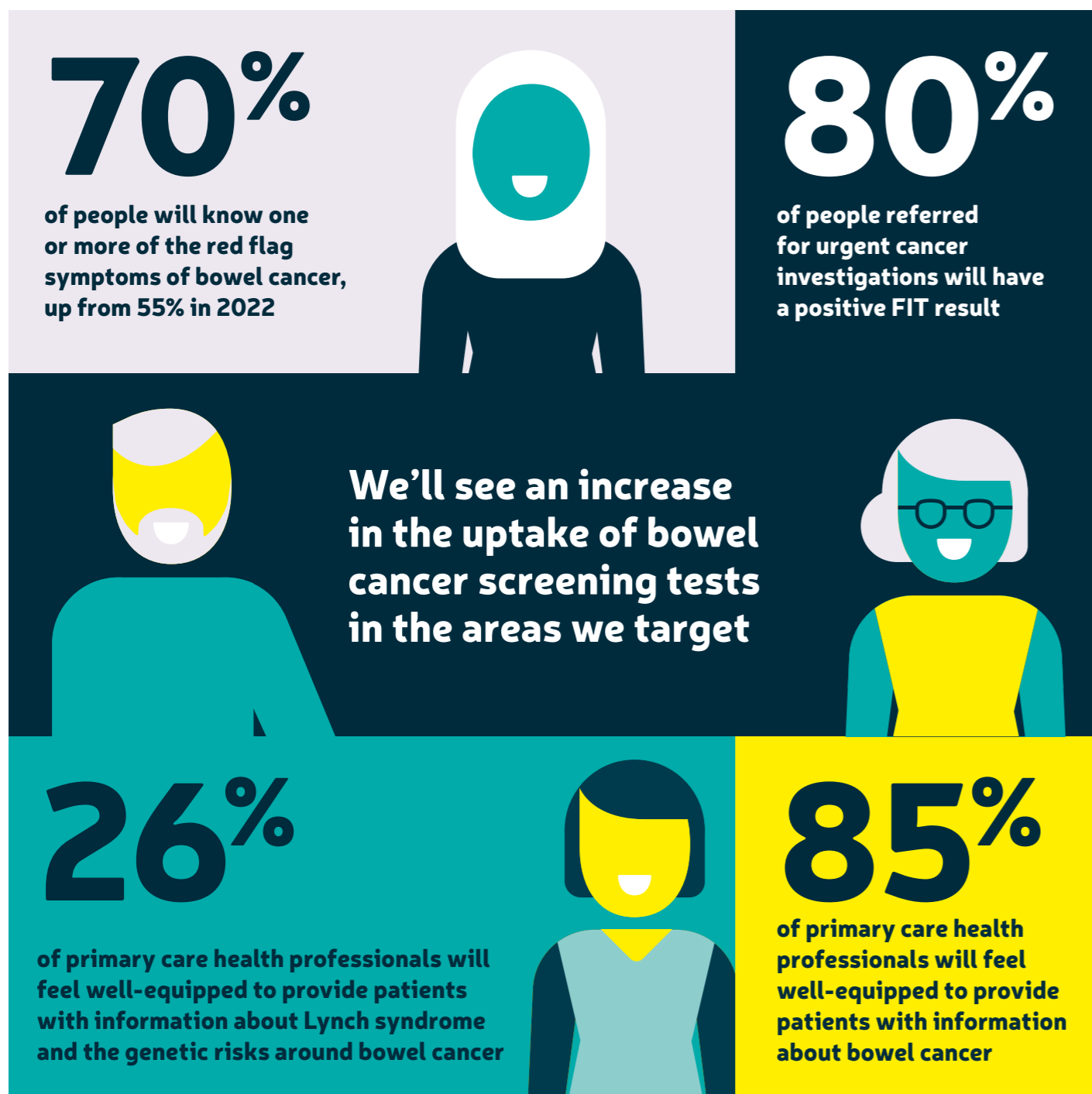
We'll raise funds to support our work alongside our wonderful community of supporters and funders. We'll be transparent and accountable, making every penny work hard for the bowel cancer community today, and in the years ahead.

We'll enhance our infrastructure and technology to provide the secure, efficient and effective operating environment required to support the delivery of all our activities from back-office support to frontline services. We'll ensure that our systems and processes are developed to provide a high-quality user experience for our staff, service users and supporters.

We'll continue to ensure that we recruit and retain a highly motivated, skilled workforce, committed to delivering on our ambitious goals. And we'll ensure equality, diversity and inclusion are at the heart of everything that we do.

The change we want to see

By 2028:



Measuring our progress

Our new strategy will run for five years, from January 2023 to December 2028.

Each year, we'll report on progress and review the strategy to ensure it's still fit for purpose in an ever-changing world.

We'll work with our partners and the bowel cancer community to deliver on our ambitious targets.

We hope you'll join us as we work towards our vision of a future where nobody dies of bowel cancer.



When I started experiencing symptoms, my GP was amazing and acted fast. Before I knew it, I was having blood tests and a FIT (faecal immunochemical test) was organised. That test is what detected and caught my bowel cancer early. My inflammation markers were so high that they referred me instantly. Due to the cancer being caught so quickly, I was lucky enough to not require any further course of treatment except for surgery.

Linzie, diagnosed at stage 1 in 2022





Bowel Cancer^{UK}
Beating bowel cancer together

Bowel Cancer UK is the UK's leading bowel cancer charity. We're determined to save lives and improve the quality of life of everyone affected by the disease.

We support and fund targeted research, provide expert information and support to patients and their families, educate the public and professionals about bowel cancer and campaign for early diagnosis and access to best treatment and care.

To donate or find out more visit

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