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Early detection is key when it comes to bowel cancer, but too many people leave it too long before going to the doctor. **Margaret Hawkins** reports

A letter from the HSE offering you a home-kit bowel test will come through the door if you're between the ages of 60 and 69. Don't ignore it. Do the simple test and return it as requested – it could save your life, says Joan Kelly, Irish Cancer Society nursing services manager.

"Presenting early with bowel cancer is vital," she says.

"There are four stages in cancer (one to four, with four being the most serious) and presenting early means it's caught early and treatment is simpler.

"The fact is, though, that while women do present earlier than men, 45% of them are at stage three or four of the cancer when they finally see a doctor. That means we are into the trickier treatment category straightaway, where the cancer is not as curable.

"More men are at stage three or four when they first go to the doctor about their bowel problems (49%), so we have to get the early detection message out there."

SYMPTOMS BEING MISINTERPRETED

So, how come everyone leaves it so long before getting checked out? Are they interpreting the symptoms as something else?

"Yes," she says, "they may think it is IBS (irritable bowel syndrome), gall bladder trouble, a



Sean Mansfield with his son John.

Picture: Carol Dunne

BOWEL CANCER: SPOT THE SIGNS EARLY

gynaecological problem, haemorrhoids (piles) or hormonal change due to menopause.

"Symptoms (for bowel cancer) can sometimes be vague, so they can easily be misinterpreted. There can be stomach symptoms and bowel symptoms and you might put them down to eating something that doesn't agree with you or you're asking yourself are you intolerant to something. That's why it's important to know the symptoms and talk to your doctor."

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

So, what are the early warning signs? There is a list, Joan says:

- Blood in a bowel motion or bleeding from the back

passage lasting more than a month.

- Change in bowel habit. "Everyone has a pattern and would know that they had a persistent change, such as a change from diarrhoea to constipation, for example. Feeling like they haven't fully emptied their bowel after a bowel motion can be a symptom too."
 - Pain or discomfort in abdomen, tummy or back passage area.
 - Trapped wind or swollen tummy. "Again could be put down to a lot of things."
 - Weightloss.
 - Tiredness and general deterioration in health.
- "It's important to make yourself

aware of the early signs of bowel cancer. Nobody is going to say you shouldn't have bothered going to the doctor. It's important to observe your health – that's important across the board, of course," she says.

THIRD MOST COMMON CANCER

2,486 new cases of bowel cancer were recorded in 2014 by the National Cancer Registry.

"It's a bit more common in men than women but we don't know exactly why. Bowel cancer accounts for about 12% of all cancers and it accounted for 992 deaths in Ireland last year. Bowel cancer is number three on the list of the most common cancers to

kill people in this country, after prostate and breast cancer."

The correct term for bowel cancer, she says, is colorectal cancer.

"Bowel cancer is a term we are happy to use, but from the technical and medical perspective you can get a cancer of the large bowel, which is called colon cancer, and you can also get cancer lower down – of the anus or the rectum as well – but all these are covered by the terms bowel or colorectal cancer."

STAGES ONE TO FOUR WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

What are the stages mentioned above?

"Stage one means that the can-

WORDS OF LIFE

The Lord is nigh unto all that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth. He will fulfill the desire of them that fear him: he also will hear their cry, and will save them.

Psalm 145 v 18 & 19.

READER'S STORY

Sean Mansfield (68), Mooneenroe, Co Kilkenny

Sean Mansfield (68) was diagnosed with bowel cancer in 1995. He stresses the importance of getting checked out early. He tells us the story of his illness:

"Twenty years ago I noticed a change in bowel habits. I was going to the toilet more often but there wasn't a lot happening," he says.

"I never carried weight but I was losing weight and I'd also noticed a lack of energy."

SYMPTOMS

"As the months went on, the symptoms got worse and there was a fair show of blood. I was referred to a surgeon after seeing my GP and had a colonoscopy done within a fortnight. It was good to have private medical insurance to get rapid access at a time like that.

"Hearing the word cancer and the surgeon saying that I'd need a colostomy (bag) after the operation was difficult to hear.

"I had the operation a week after the colonoscopy, in December 1995. There was a family history of it, yes, as my grandfather had it in older age. There can be a hereditary side to it – that's why everyone in a family has to be mindful of that and get checked out. The earlier you catch something, the easier it is to treat.

"I was 48 at the time this happened and dry stock was the main farm enterprise. Our youngest child had just started school and our eldest had just gone to college, so it was a worrying time for Maureen and myself.

"With lots of family help, things

were kept ticking over while I was recuperating.

"When I saw my consultant the following month I was told the cancer was on the march and, in order to stop that, I would need radiotherapy and chemotherapy.

"I had 21 sessions of radiotherapy, staying in the Mater Private during the week for five weeks and coming home at weekends. Then it was back to St Luke's in Kilkenny for chemotherapy, one session every month for six months, which wasn't too bad.

"As the months went on, I felt stronger, although the chemo tiredness can take a while to get over. I

was glad to have it all over by the summer of 1996 and thankful for all the help I received.

"The colostomy bag is very neat and no bother now. At the beginning it was hard to accept. You think that's for older people, it couldn't be for me, but, over time, I got used to it."

HOBBIES

"I've changed my life a good bit since then. I took up golf half way through my recuperation and I find it a terrific outlet.

"My other hobby is writing. I was doing it prior to being diagnosed as part of the Clough Writers' Group. We've just published our fourth book, *Kilpatrick*, in aid of Carlow/Kilkenny home care. I write to record the past – about fair days and saving turf, for example – and about things that are first cousins of farming.

"Both the golf and the creative writing are forms of escapism and help me relax. Yes, it was a big shock to have cancer, but that experience gives you something to measure other experiences by. I don't sweat the small stuff anymore, as they say.

"Looking back, I could have gone earlier to the doctor. I'd encourage people to get checked out if they notice any change in bowel habits. Also, I'd encourage anyone who is invited to do the BowelCheck to do it so that they are screened.

"I also think it's important that people don't just assume that they have something like IBS (irritable bowel syndrome) or haemorrhoids. It's not an area for anyone to self-diagnose."

“ I never carried weight but I was losing weight and I'd also noticed a lack of energy. As the months went on, the symptoms got worse and there was a fair show of blood. I was referred to a surgeon after seeing my GP and had a colonoscopy done within a fortnight

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cer is fairly limited to the organ it started in. Stage two means that the cancer is probably stretching out a little bit around the area it started in, but not very far. Stage three may involve it having spread locally (around the organ it started in). Stage four is where you have secondary cancer at a distance from the primary site, meaning it is widespread.

"By absolute logic, if you catch bowel cancer early you're dealing with something much smaller and you'll need minimal treatment, possibly surgery alone," she says.

"For stage two and three, you're looking at surgery and chemotherapy and stage four is a life-limiting condition and is not curable."

BOWELCHECK – AVAIL OF IT

A State-run HSE bowel screen programme has now begun in earnest.

"It's a bit similar to Breast-Check, where you get the letter in the post. But, in the case of BowelCheck, you get a letter to say that you will soon be sent a test kit which will enable you to send a sample of your stool (faeces) away

to a lab for free to be tested for abnormality.

"It only takes a few minutes and only involves a smear of faeces being put on a special stick. You can do it in the comfort of your own bathroom, she says, and it only takes a few minutes. Everything is clearly explained on the package. You then post the special envelope and container back to the address given."

At the moment, people aged 60-69 are being notified about the test. Only people who have a positive result (for some cell abnormality) in this test will be invited to attend a hospital for a colonoscopy.

HOW TO AVOID BOWEL CANCER

"It's a general health message really," Joan Kelly says.

- Take more exercise.
- Be a healthy weight.
- Watch for signs or symptoms.
- Have more fresh fruit and green vegetables in your diet.
- Limit fat and protein.
- Don't overcook vegetables.
- Don't eat white bread, especially if it's soft.

- Eat more high fibre/high roughage foods such as brown bread.
- Be aware of family history, eg polyps.

WHAT IS BOWEL CANCER?

Bowel cancer occurs where cells lining the bowel become abnormal and start growing out of control.

The Irish Cancer Society is currently lobbying the HSE to extend the screening programme to people up to the age of 75.

RISK FACTORS

- Obesity.
- Those with diets that are high in processed food like cured meats.
- Family history – you are more at risk if a first-degree relation has had bowel cancer, particularly if they were young at the time.
- Family history of polyps.

April is Bowel Cancer Awareness Month. For more information, see www.cancer.ie and www.hse.ie or ring the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700. **CL**

Will Aaron be found in time in Emmerdale?



SOAP watch

Aaron's punishing fitness regime catches up with him this week, writes Aisling O'Toole

EASTENDERS

It's a sad week on the Square as the Brannings get news that Jim has died, while the Carters rally around Stan as he also slips away shortly after his marriage to Cora – but not before some drama as Mick and Shirley struggle to bury the hatchet. With Buster back on the Square and causing trouble, will Shirley honour her father's wishes and make amends with Mick?

Elsewhere, Kat is released from hospital but despite putting on a brave face for social services, it becomes clear that she's far from her old self. As Stacey, Alfie and Mo rally round, will Kat be allowed keep her children?

CORONATION STREET

As Anna and Tim rally around, smitten with the new baby, a struggling Faye admits she's not sure she wants to keep her child. While Owen supports her decision, Anna feels he's betraying the family. As the pair start to have the mother of all rows, Anna snaps and reveals that she no longer loves Owen. Is this the end for the pair or can they start to repair their relationship?

Elsewhere, Todd discovers Tracy's secret and is convinced to stay quiet by a pay rise and a promise that Tracy is working on a master plan. What does she have planned for Tony?

EMMERDALE

Adam goes missing on yet another run this week and as a worried Chas asks Robert for help, she reveals that she intends to tell Chrissie everything. Desperate to protect his secrets, Robert calls a business contact explaining that he needs to get rid of somebody, for good. However, when Chas admits that she'll keep his secret, Robert frantically tries to cancel his plans. Can he get to his contact in time?

Elsewhere, Laurel stoops to a new low when she breaks into the village hall to steal alcohol. Marlon seeks help from Paddy and Rhona as he accepts that his wife is a full-blown alcoholic.

FAIR CITY

Jackie and Pete's divorce is finalised, but it's clear that Pete is struggling to let go. As the pair argue, an angry Jackie tells Pete to leave her alone. However, when he's late meeting Dolores at the hospital, Pete lies about where he's been instead of admitting he was with Jackie. Is there still a spark between the pair? Elsewhere, Kerri-Ann spends the evening with Frank but while he's all gung-ho about them becoming a couple, she's starting to have second thoughts. Kerri-Ann later admits to Louise that she still loves Decco, but does he still love her? **CL**