

# Lowering the bowel screening starting age to 58

## September 2025

### At a Glance

The age at which people can start taking part in the free National Bowel Screening Programme is being lowered from 60 to 58 years of age. Currently, people can have free bowel screening from the age of 60 to 74. Lowering the age to 58 means that at least 122,000 more people will be eligible for screening over the first year.

Lowering the age to 58 will take place in two stages. The first stage will start from 6 October 2025 in the Northern region and Te Waipounamu (South Island), and the second stage will begin in March 2026 in the remaining North Island regions of Midland and Central.

People turning 58 or 59, or who are already 58 or 59, don't need to do anything. They will be mailed their bowel screening kit around their next birthday or be contacted by a local health provider, once age extension is introduced in their area.

People who are 59 will receive a kit around their 60th birthday as part of the existing programme, whether or not the lower age range is available in their area yet.

Bowel screening aims to save lives by helping find bowel cancer at an early stage when it can often be successfully treated. There may be no warning signs that someone has bowel cancer.

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of bowel cancer in the world – bowel cancer is our second highest cause of cancer death. More than 3300 people are diagnosed with bowel cancer every year and more than 1200 die from it.

### Saving lives

Modelling estimates that lowering the bowel screening starting age to 58 will prevent 771 additional bowel cancers and 566 additional deaths over 25 years, compared to the current 60 to 74 age range.

Cabinet also approved a very significant investment in a range of initiatives to lift bowel screening participation rates, particularly focused on populations with lower screening rates.

These initiatives include:

- The national roll-out of bowel screening kit drop off at laboratory collection centres to provide a more culturally acceptable option for some.
- Developing a kaimahi education module on bowel screening, so Health NZ district staff have the information needed to help encourage communities to participate in bowel screening.
- Updating and delivering the national multimedia campaign to promote the new age range and to encourage people to take part in bowel screening.
- An enhanced focus on promoting bowel screening in primary care every May.
- Developing a range of approaches to improve participation rates in groups with lower participation rates.

- Making improvements to the Bowel Screening Register.
- Introducing the use of barcoded kits, so kits can be given directly to high needs groups in selected settings such as GP appointments, outreach and events.

### Current pilots for Māori and Pacific Peoples

- Three Health NZ districts have been part of a two-year learning pilot offering bowel screening from the age of 50 for Māori and Pacific Peoples. Tairāwhiti and MidCentral districts complete their pilots later in October and November 2025 respectively, while Waikato District completed its two-year pilot in December 2024.
- People who are part of those pilots will continue to be invited for bowel screening, provided they remain eligible and still live in one of these districts.

### How bowel screening works

- The bowel screening test is quick, simple and can be done at home. The test can detect tiny traces of blood present in a small sample of bowel motion – which may be an early warning sign that something is wrong with the bowel.
- Data from the bowel screening programme shows that the bowel screening test will find at least 7 out of 10 cancers that are present.
- Bowel cancers do not bleed all the time, so sometimes a cancer can be missed. Bowel cancer may also start to develop between screening tests. For these reasons it's important to have bowel screening every two years and for people to talk to their doctor straight away if they have any bowel cancer symptoms.
- Further investigation after a positive screening test can also detect polyps (growths). These are not cancer but may develop into a cancer over a number of years. Most polyps can be easily removed, reducing the risk that bowel cancer will develop.
- A bowel screening kit is sent to people's home every two years from the age of 60 to 74 (now being lowered to a starting age of 58 years).
- Since the beginning of the programme in July 2017, more than 2.53 million home test kits have been sent out and nearly 3000 cancers have been detected (Sept 2025 figures). At least 40% of these cancers were detected at an early stage, when they can often be successfully treated.
- As at February 2025, the participation rate for the bowel screening programme was 57.8%, with a participation target of 60%. Participation rates differ widely depending on ethnicity and age range, as follows.
  - Māori: 51.5%
  - Pacific Peoples: 39.1%
  - Asian populations: 44.2%
  - Other: 62.4%
- The National Bowel Screening Programme is for those who have no symptoms of bowel cancer. People with the following symptoms, or who are concerned about their bowel health, should see their doctor right away:
  - a change in their normal bowel habit that continues for several weeks
  - blood in their bowel motion.

### For more information

- More information about bowel screening is available on the [Time to Screen](https://timetobowelscreen.nz) website (timetobowelscreen.nz), by calling the National Bowel Screening Programme on 0800 924 432 or emailing on [info@bowelscreening.health.nz](mailto:info@bowelscreening.health.nz).
- Information about bowel screening for health professionals is available on the [Health NZ website](https://www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/health-services-and-programmes/national-bowel-screening-programme) (www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/health-services-and-programmes/national-bowel-screening-programme)

## Frequently asked questions

### What changes will be needed in general practice to get ready for age extension to 58?

Changes have been made in practice management systems (PMSs) to reflect the new age range. The NBSP has worked with PMS suppliers on this – general practices do not need to take any specific action.

Bowel screening collateral has been updated to reflect the new age range. Updated collateral may be provided by district bowel screening teams and can also be ordered directly by general practices from the [HealthEd](https://www.healthed.co.nz) website at no cost to practices.

When seeing patients, please take the opportunity to check that their ethnicity and contact details are correctly recorded.

### Can GPs request a kit for a patient who is already 58 or 59, before their next birthday?

Yes – if that person is in the priority population (once age extension is rolled out in their areas). All other patients will need to wait for their routine invitation.

To order the kit you need the person's:

- name and NHI number
- date of birth
- current address and phone number.

GPs can order the kit:

- via their patient management system
- email [info@bowelscreening.health.nz](mailto:info@bowelscreening.health.nz)
- call 0800 924 432.

GPs can also order kits for participants who have lost or damaged their kit or if the kit has expired.

For more info about how general practice can order a kit, see the [NBSP Primary Care Guide](https://www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/health-services-and-programmes/national-bowel-screening-programme), on the NBSP webpages (www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/health-services-and-programmes/national-bowel-screening-programme).

**Who can take part in the free bowel screening programme?**

Patient's age	Eligible to take part in the free National Bowel Screening Programme?	How it works
60 to 74 years old	Yes	A bowel screening test kit will be sent to them every two years until they turn 75. If they are 60 to 74 and haven't received a kit, they can call 0800 924 432
57 years old	Patient will be eligible to take part once they turn 58, when the lower starting age is rolled out in their district	They will be mailed their kit around their 58 <sup>th</sup> birthday or will be contacted by a local provider, once age extension is introduced in their area.
Already 58	Patient will be eligible to take part once the lower starting age is rolled out in their district.	They will be mailed their kit around their 59 <sup>th</sup> birthday or can be invited earlier if they are a priority population.
Already 59	Patient will be eligible to take part once the lower starting age is rolled out in their district.	They will be mailed their kit around their 60 <sup>th</sup> birthday or can be invited earlier if they are a priority population.
Māori & Pacific peoples aged 50 to 59 in Waikato, Tairāwhiti and MidCentral	<p><i>Tairāwhiti and MidCentral districts currently offer bowel screening from the age of 50 for Māori and Pacific peoples as part of a two-year learning pilot. The Tairāwhiti pilot finishes on 8 October 2025 and the MidCentral pilot on 19 November 2025. Waikato's two-year pilot finished on 4 December 2024.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If the patient lives in Waikato, Tairāwhiti or MidCentral districts and has been invited to take part in bowel screening as part of the age extension pilot, they will continue to be invited, provided they are living in any one of these districts.</li> </ul>	A bowel screening test kit will continue to be sent to those already on the programme every two years until they turn 75