

MEDIA RELEASE

31 July 2019

Australia's disadvantaged fall behind in bowel cancer

New Cancer Council analysis has shown Australians living in our most disadvantaged areas have significantly higher bowel cancer incidence rates and are being left behind in bowel cancer screening, compared to the most advantaged Australians.

The Australian Cancer Atlas shows nearly a quarter (21%) of the most disadvantaged regions in Australia have a higher than average incidence of bowel cancer, compared to less than 1% of our most advantaged regions¹.

Simultaneously, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data from the 2018 National Bowel Cancer Screening Program Monitoring Report has shown participation rates for the bowel screening program were highest for people living in the most advantaged areas (43%), and lowest for people living in the most disadvantaged areas (39%).

The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program is designed to detect blood in the stool, which can be a sign of cancer or pre-cancerous lesions. If found early, 90% of bowel cancers can be successfully treated.

Professor Sanchia Aranda, CEO Cancer Council Australia said, "Australia has some of the best cancer outcomes in the world however, our most disadvantaged Australians are falling behind.

"We know that the most disadvantaged Australians, many of whom live in regional and remote areas, are one third more likely to die from bowel cancer than Australians living in the most advantaged areas. Participating in the screening program is one of the best things eligible Australians can do to reduce their risk of dying from bowel cancer."

"The disparity between our most and least advantaged regions returning their bowel cancer screening test kits shows that even though the free test is being sent to Australians aged 50-74, we need to ensure all Australians know what the test is and why it is important, so that they do it when it is sent to them in the mail.

Professor Aranda continued, "In addition to lifting screening rates, we also need to be educating Australians about the factors that influence your risk of developing bowel cancer and those factors we can change.

"Lifestyle factors that can increase your risk of bowel cancer include poor diet, physical inactivity, alcohol, obesity and smoking.

"Maintaining a healthy body weight, enjoying a healthy diet with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and limiting red and processed meats can all contribute to reducing your bowel cancer risk so we would encourage all Australians to take steps to make these changes."

Other factors such as older age, family history of bowel cancer and having conditions such as inflammatory bowel disease also increase the risk of bowel cancer.

¹ Incidence rate for bowel cancer is 74.0 cases per 100,000. Average of 14, 868 cases diagnosed per year

See <https://atlas.cancer.org.au/app/#/@-26.0152,135.0000,3.75z&data=H999u#z!EOYlk>

Currently only four in 10 eligible Australians participate in the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program. Studies have shown, if this figure is increased to six in 10 it could save 84,000 lives over the next 20 years.

Free bowel screening tests are sent by the Australian government every two years to eligible Australians aged 50-74.

All Australians should be aware of the symptoms of bowel cancer such as unexplained blood in their poo or toilet bowl, persistent changes in bowel habits, persistent abdominal pain or cramping or unexplained weight loss, and get anything unusual checked out regardless of their age or when they last completed the screening test.

Cancer Council's national bowel cancer screening media campaign is funded through a \$10 million Federal Government grant.

ENDS

For more information please contact:

Tegan Brown, Cancer Council Australia, media@cancer.org.au or call (02) 8063 4109 (our media landline diverts to our on-call mobile outside of hours).

About the Australian Cancer Atlas

The Australian Cancer Atlas is a collaborative project being developed by statisticians, cancer researchers, visualisation experts and IT specialists from Cancer Council Queensland (CCQ), Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and representatives from Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), supported by the FrontierSI (formerly the Cooperative Research Centre for Spatial Information), with additional input from government, community members, consumers and the media. The Atlas has additional support from the Centre for Research Excellence in Prostate Cancer Survivorship.

The Atlas has been endorsed by the Australasian Association of Cancer Registries and Cancer Council Australia, and investigators access expertise from the Australian Research Council, Centre of Excellence for Mathematical and Statistical Frontiers (ACEMS).

You can access the atlas at: <https://atlas.cancer.org.au>