

Faecal immunochemical tests to triage patients with lower abdominal symptoms for suspected colorectal cancer referrals in primary care: a systematic review and cost-effectiveness analysis

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Plain English summary

Faecal immunochemical tests for suspected colorectal cancer

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Bowel (colorectal) cancer is the third most common cancer in the UK. Symptoms, such as anaemia, abdominal pain and altered bowel habit, can be early warnings of bowel cancer, but these symptoms usually have another explanation. In order to be sure whether or not someone has bowel cancer, hospital tests, such as colonoscopy, are needed. Because colonoscopy can be unpleasant and carries a small risk of heavy bleeding or tearing of the bowel, it is important to find tests that can help to select people who really need to have colonoscopy, that is, those who are more likely to have bowel cancer and other serious lower gastrointestinal disease, including inflammatory bowel disease.

The faecal immunochemical test (FIT) for haemoglobin detects blood in the faeces that is not visible to the naked eye.

This report looks at whether or not faecal immunochemical testing should be offered to people reporting bowel symptoms to their doctor who are considered to be at low risk of having bowel cancer.

We included 10 studies that looked at how well the results of faecal immunochemical testing can predict whether or not bowel cancer is found when a person has a colonoscopy examination. Research indicates that a negative FIT result could be used to reliably determine that a person does not have bowel cancer in around three-quarters of people with low-risk bowel symptoms. Using faecal immunochemical testing could therefore reduce the number of people who do not have bowel cancer undergoing 'unnecessary' colonoscopy. Although most people who have a positive FIT result and low-risk bowel symptoms do not have bowel cancer, other bowel diseases are often found when these people are sent for colonoscopy examination.

Because there has been no research comparing different brands of FITs, we cannot know whether or not any one test is better than another.

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