

Don't sit on your symptoms

Eating an apple each day used to be considered a convenient way of avoiding the need for a doctor's visit; although there are other lifestyle and dietary issues that may be more important. Nevertheless, the health benefits of fresh fruit and vegetables are now well known.

In any event, apples are a good source of fibre and vitamins – especially vitamin C, but some other vitamins and minerals as well. In the fibre department, apples contain both soluble fibre – such as pectin which helps prevent the build-up of cholesterol in the lining of the blood vessels – and insoluble fibre, which provides bulk in the intestinal tract. This bulk enables a quick passage of food through the digestive system – just what the doctor ordered.

Probably the best known Australian apple is the green "Granny Smith". However, it's the red apple which has greater significance this month. The red apple is the symbol of the Bowel Cancer and Digestive Research Institute; and Red Apple Day during June each year aims to increase awareness of bowel cancer and other gastro-intestinal problems.

Other than skin cancer, bowel cancer is the commonest of all cancers affecting both men and women. There are 10,000 new cases of bowel cancer diagnosed every year; and there are twice as many deaths from bowel cancer in Australia as from motor vehicle accidents. One Australian dies from bowel cancer – also known as colorectal cancer (CRC) – every two hours.

Perhaps because these statistics are so frightening, there is a reluctance for us to seek medical attention or even acknowledge the possibility of CRC; but bowel cancer is both treatable and curable.

In the early stages, bowel cancer often has no symptoms; but blood in the bowel motions, persistent changes in bowel habits (diarrhoea or constipation) frequent "wind" pains and loss of weight for no known reason, should all be investigated by your doctor. If a close relative has had bowel cancer, your own risk increases significantly, and a regular check-up is necessary.

When you turn 50, 55 or 65 you're eligible to receive a free bowel cancer screening test as part of the Australian Government's recently restored National Bowel Cancer Screening program. Whilst this initiative has been widely applauded, the decision by Government to defer the funding of two medicines used to treat bowel cancer has been roundly criticised. Gut Foundation President, Professor Terry Bolin stated that he couldn't believe such a rich industrial country like Australia "can't afford to pay for the treatment of the commonest cancer in the community".

Another screening strategy is a colonoscopy whereby small growths called polyps are detected and, if found to be cancerous, are removed. Apart from the existence of polyps, bowel cancer appears to be more common in people whose diet is high in fat, and low in fibre, fruit and vegetables. Smoking and alcohol consumption may also add to the risk.

So just crunching an apple a day won't mean we have no need for a regular check-up; but along with other fruit and vegetables the apple may reduce our bowel cancer risk. We also need to limit our alcohol intake to no more than two drinks a day and we should definitely not smoke. It seems regular physical activity also reduces the risk.

Pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care material can give you more information about bowel cancer. Ask the pharmacy for the fact cards titled *Fibre and Bowel Health* and *Fat and Cholesterol*. They contain some great hints on how to keep your bowel and also the rest of your body healthy and functioning well.

To find your nearest Self Care pharmacy phone 1300 369 772 or visit our website www.psa.org.au