Bowel cancer - key knowledge points on adjuvant therapy
For general practitioners

Benefits of adjuvant therapy
While surgery is the mainstay of curative treatment for bowel cancer, adjuvant therapy can further improve outcomes for suitable patients, resulting in one or more of the following:

- ↓ recurrence
- ↓ mortality
- ↑ survival

For example, for patients with clinically resectable rectal cancer without evidence of distant disease, the 10-year cumulative incidence of local recurrence is reduced by more than half for those receiving short-course preoperative radiotherapy compared with those receiving surgery alone.¹

Cancer returns within 10 years of treatment

11% of rectal cancer cases vs 5% of rectal cancer cases

with only surgery

with radiotherapy and surgery

According to existing Australian clinical practice guidelines, all patients with lymph node-positive colon cancer should be considered for adjuvant chemotherapy, and all patients with high-risk rectal cancer should be considered for adjuvant preoperative or postoperative radiotherapy.²

Existing uptake of adjuvant therapy
NSW estimates show that of patients with lymph node-positive colon cancer who undergo surgery, 27-35% do not receive adjuvant chemotherapy.² Of patients with high-risk rectal cancer who undergo surgery, 47-58% do not receive radiotherapy.³

Non-receipt could be due to many reasons including patient fitness and preference. However, age appears to be one of the biggest factors in determining the likelihood of receiving adjuvant therapy. Older patients are less likely to undergo treatment, independent of the patient’s comorbidities and general health status.³ Treatment efficacy and toxicity are not necessarily associated with age and the guidelines suggest that patients should be considered for adjuvant therapy regardless of age.²

As high as 35% of eligible patients do not have chemotherapy

As high as 58% of eligible patients do not have radiotherapy

Practice tips

Clinician trust and reduction of cancer recurrence are the most important factors in patients accepting therapy.⁴

The majority of patients want detailed information and involvement in therapy decisions.⁴

Ensure all eligible patients are considered for adjuvant therapy. Provide information for shared decision-making.


Click on the links below for more information on:
Clinical guidelines  Chemotherapy side effects  Radiotherapy side effects

Working together to lessen the impact of cancer
cancerinstitute.org.au/bowel-cancer