

SECURING NEW ZEALAND'S FUTURE



**BUDGET
2026**

Hon Simeon Brown Minister of Health

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Next step taken to lower bowel screening age

More than 200,000 additional New Zealanders will gain access to life-saving bowel cancer screening as the age of eligibility for free bowel screening is lowered further, Health Minister Simeon Brown says.

“From September this year, the starting age for free bowel screening will be lowered from 58 to 56, extending access to hundreds of thousands more New Zealanders and continuing our commitment to align New Zealand’s screening age with Australia,” Mr Brown says.

Budget 2026 provides an additional \$45.582 million to support the expansion, including \$33.118 million over four years for programme delivery and \$12.464 million for infrastructure and equipment to increase colonoscopy capacity.

“The rollout of lowering the screening age from 60 to 58 across most of the country is nearly complete. This next step builds on that progress and will help more New Zealanders benefit from earlier detection and treatment.

“Once the next rollout to 56 is complete, more than 200,000 additional people are expected to become eligible for bowel screening, giving them a better chance of having cancer detected early, when treatment is most effective.

“Over the next 25 years, lowering the screening age to 56 is expected to prevent 638 bowel cancers and save 522 lives. Earlier diagnosis means faster treatment, better outcomes, and ultimately more lives saved.

“This investment will fund more than 800,000 additional screening kits, increased workforce capacity, new diagnostic equipment, and more than 6,200 additional colonoscopies for people who require follow-up care after screening.

“We are committed to continuing to lower the bowel screening age to match Australia, but we need to ensure the health system has the capacity to deliver timely follow-up care and treatment.

“That’s why we are taking a phased approach – expanding access step-by-step while building the workforce and infrastructure needed to support the programme safely and sustainably.

“Reducing the starting age to 56 is the next milestone in that commitment, and we will continue working toward lowering the age further as quickly as possible and as capacity grows.”

Mr Brown says the expansion builds on other improvements already underway to strengthen bowel cancer detection and treatment.

“The FIT for Symptomatic pathway is continuing to roll out nationwide, giving people of any age with bowel cancer symptoms access to a simple, non-invasive test to help clinicians assess risk and prioritise urgent cases.

“This pathway is expected to be fully implemented nationwide by the end of September, helping to reduce unnecessary colonoscopies, free up specialist capacity, and support the safe expansion of the bowel screening programme.

“We are focused on fixing the basics and building the future of our healthcare system, and expanding bowel screening is a key part of that. By lowering the screening age and improving how we detect and prioritise people with symptoms, more cancers can be found earlier, more New Zealanders can access treatment sooner, and more lives can be saved.”

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