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The researchers used tissue samples from IBD patients - but it is hoped their method can be used to develop a simple blood test to identify those IBD patients most at risk. About 500,000 people in the UK live with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), including Crohn's and ulcerative colitis.

Currently, they are offered regular checks for pre-cancerous growths in their gut, which, if detected, indicate about a 30% chance of bowel cancer developing over 10 years.

But the UK research found DNA changes in those pre-cancerous cells, when analysed by an algorithm, were more than 90% accurate in predicting who would develop bowel cancer over the next five years. Prof Trevor Graham, from the Institute of Cancer Research in London, said: "Most people with ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease won't develop bowel cancer.

"But for those that have these conditions and are showing signs of pre-cancer in their colon, there are some tough decisions to make.

"Either they have it monitored regularly, in the hope that it doesn't become cancer, or they have their bowel removed to guarantee they don't get cancer in the future.

"Neither of these options are particularly pleasant.

"Our test and algorithm give people with IBD, and the doctors who care for them, the best possible information so that they can make the right decision about how to manage their cancer risk. Research like this will save lives," Craig Foster, from Waterlooville, Hants, whose wife, Fariba, died of bowel cancer in February 2024, said.

Fariba had lived with ulcerative colitis since she was 18, when three-quarters of her bowel were removed.

"It gives me comfort to know that there are scientists working right now so that no-one has to experience the same situation Fariba was in," Craig said.

"Fariba died just six months after she was diagnosed.

"Even though it was a short time, it was the worst time.

"Cancer takes no prisoners - and it doesn't matter who you are or from what walk of life, everyone is affected in some way"