

Colon cancer is one of the most common cancers in the United States today. It is also highly curable. If simple steps are followed, colon cancer may often be detected and prevented. In fact, earlier detection can increase the cure rate of colon cancer to 91 percent.

At age 50 – age 45 if you are African American – you should begin regular screening for colon cancer. If you have factors that increase your risk of developing colon cancer, your doctor may recommend earlier and more frequent screening.

Colon cancer facts

Colon cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States. Each year, approximately 135,400 new cases are diagnosed and an estimated 56,700 people die from the disease.

Almost all cases of colon cancer begin with the development of a small polyp on the lining of the intestinal wall. A polyp is an abnormal growth of cells that can become cancerous, and then travel to other parts of the body.

Symptoms of colon cancer

There are usually no early symptoms of colon cancer, so the best way to prevent and cure the disease is with colon cancer screening.

However, there are a few signs to watch for. If you have a change in bowel habits (blood in your stools, black stools), unexplained weight loss or constant fatigue, talk to your doctor. Keep in mind that cancer is just one potential cause for these symptoms.

Understanding your risk

No one knows for sure what causes colon cancer, but age plays a role. Ninety percent of people diagnosed with colon cancer are over the age of 50, which is why 50 is the recommended age for beginning screening, or if you are African American, at the age of 45.

There are other factors that increase your risk. You may need earlier and more frequent screening if you have any of the following:

- a personal history of ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease
- a personal history of large polyps or colorectal cancer
- a first-degree relative—your mother, father, sister or brother—who had colon cancer or a non-cancerous polyp before 60 years of age
- two first-degree relatives who had colon cancer at any age

Screening tests

Many people would rather avoid the screening tests used for colon cancer because they are embarrassed or concerned about the discomfort they may cause. You should not let these worries stop you from getting the screening you need. Early detection can save lives. Following is a list of common screening tests. Discuss these options with your doctor to decide the best screening for you.

Fecal occult blood test (FOBT)

This test, which requires three samples, detects the presence of blood in the stools—a warning sign for colorectal cancer. The FOBT is relatively easy and inexpensive. However, many factors can interfere with the accuracy of this screening procedure. Follow-up testing is necessary to confirm positive results. If this method of screening is chosen, it is recommended that it be done yearly for people aged 50 to 80 years.

Flexible sigmoidoscopy

For this test, a thin, lighted tube called a flexible sigmoidoscope is inserted into your rectum following cleansing of the colon. With this device, your doctor can see about 27 inches into your colon. About 60 percent of cancers and polyps that might become cancer can be identified in this manner because they tend to accumulate toward the lower end of your bowel. If this method of screening is chosen, it is recommended that it be done every five years for people aged 50 to 80 years. If you are African American, screening is recommended to begin at age 45.

Combination flexible sigmoidoscopy and FOBT

You, along with your doctor, may decide to use both the flexible sigmoidoscopy and FOBT to screen for colon cancer. This combination approach includes an annual FOBT and a flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years.

Total colon evaluation

A total colon evaluation can be done using a colonoscopy, colon X-ray or a flexible sigmoidoscopy combined with a colon X-ray. A colonoscopy is similar to a flexible sigmoidoscopy. A slender, flexible, lighted tube is inserted into your colon, allowing your doctor to see your entire colon and rectum on an external monitor. A colon X-ray or a flexible sigmoidoscopy combined with a colon X-ray is usually done every five years. A colonoscopy is done every 10 years.

CT colonography (virtual colonoscopy)

CT colonography uses X-rays and a computer to create three-dimensional images of the interior surfaces of the entire colon. If an abnormality is found, a regular colonoscopy must be performed to remove it or take tissue

samples for testing. CT colonography is an evolving research tool, and it is not yet known if it is as accurate as colonoscopy.

What you can do

Several lifestyle factors are thought to play a role in colorectal cancer. By maintaining healthy habits, you may reduce your chance of developing this disease.

Eat less fat

Research has found that obesity, low fiber intake, high calorie intake and high-fat diets may cause cancer. Reducing the amount of fat in your diet can help you control calories and maintain a healthy weight.

Be active

A sedentary lifestyle may increase colon cancer risk. Gradually work up to a routine of 30 minutes of activity on most days of the week.

If you want more information on any medical topic, please contact the Park Nicollet Health Library. A medical librarian can help you find out what you need to know.

Web site: parknicollet.com/healthlibrary

E-mail: library@parknicollet.com

Phone: 952-993-5011

These guidelines were developed by a team of health care experts from several fields and medical groups including Park Nicollet Health Services, HealthPartners and Mayo Clinic. The team also relied on scientific evidence provided by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. These guidelines will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis as scientific evidence changes.

Screening for Colon Cancer