

Colorectal-cancer screening

Health Education Services

What is colorectal cancer?

Colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer in men and women in the United States. Colorectal cancer refers to cancer of the large bowel (colon) and rectum, which make up a major part of your digestive system.

Why screen for colorectal cancer?

There are few symptoms in the early stages of colorectal cancer, so regular screening is very important. It can improve the chances of finding problems early, while they can be prevented or cured. Although no screening is 100-percent effective at catching the disease, colorectal cancer screening can detect cancer or pre-cancer tissue, called polyps, in the colon or rectum before any symptoms are present.

Who should be screened, and when?

Regular screening is recommended for everyone beginning at age 50. You may need to begin screening earlier if you have a history of colorectal cancer in a parent or sibling, or if you have a personal history of colon polyps or inflammatory bowel disease. Screening after age 80 is decided on an individual basis, depending on your health.

In general, minority populations are at greater risk of dying from colorectal cancer because these populations are less likely to be screened. This includes Native Americans, Latinos, Vietnamese, and Blacks, as well as gays, lesbians, and transgender individuals. We especially urge members of minority populations to consider screening.

How do you screen for colorectal cancer?

A very safe, easy, and effective way to screen is by having an **annual Fecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT)**. In this test, you smear a small amount of your bowel movement on a special card and send it to a lab. The sample is tested for tiny amounts of hidden blood, a symptom that can indicate abnormal tissues or cancer. This method has almost no risk, requires almost no special preparation, does not require scheduling an appointment, takes very little time, and is simple, painless, and convenient.

Two other ways to screen for colorectal cancer are colonoscopy and flexible sigmoidoscopy. In both of these tests, a thin tube is inserted into the rectum and colon to look for cancer or polyps. With both tests, there is a small but important risk of problems that could require surgery or a hospital stay. Both tests require special bowel preparation. A colonoscopy also requires sedation that will help you relax during the procedure. For this reason, it is important to have someone with you to ensure you get home safely.

Who should NOT use the FOBT screening?

You should speak with your health care provider about screening by some other method if you:

- Have a history of colon cancer or have had your entire colon removed.
- Have certain conditions like inflammatory bowel disease or prior colon polyps.
- Have had heart surgery in the past 6 months.
- Have had a colonoscopy in the past 9 years.
- Have a mother, father, sibling or child who has been diagnosed with colorectal cancer.