

Colon Testing Saves Lives

What You Need to Know About Colon Testing

Colon cancer starts with a growth that is not yet cancer. Testing can help your doctor find (and remove) these growths before they become cancerous

Colorectal Cancer: Early Detection

What is colorectal cancer?

Colorectal cancer is a term used to refer to cancer that develops in the colon or the rectum. These cancers are sometimes referred to separately as colon cancer or rectal cancer, depending on where they start.

Abnormal growths in the colon or rectum

In most people, colorectal cancers develop slowly over a period of several years. Before a cancer develops, a growth of tissue or tumor usually begins as a non-cancerous polyp on the inner lining of the colon or rectum.

Importance of colorectal cancer screening

Excluding skin cancers, colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer diagnosed in both men and women in the United States. The American Cancer Society estimates that about 108,070 new cases of colon cancer (53,760 in men and 54,310 in women) and 40,740 new cases of rectal cancer (23,490 in men and 17,250 in women) will be diagnosed in 2009.

Overall, the lifetime risk for developing colorectal cancer is about 1 in 19 (5.4%). A number of other factors may also affect a person's risk.

Colorectal cancer is the third leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States when men and women are considered separately, and the second leading cause when both sexes are combined. It is expected to cause about 49,960 deaths (24,260 men and 25,700 women) during 2009.

The death rate (the number of deaths per 100,000 people per year) from colorectal cancer has been dropping for more than 20 years. There are a number of likely reasons for this. One is that polyps are being found by screening and removed before they can develop into cancers. Screening is also allowing more colorectal cancers to be found earlier, when the disease is easier to cure. As a result, there are now more than 1 million survivors of colorectal cancer in the United States.

One of the most powerful weapons in preventing colorectal cancer is regular colorectal cancer screening or testing. Regular colorectal cancer screening can, in many cases, prevent colorectal cancer altogether. This is because most colorectal cancers start as polyps, which are non-cancerous growths in the lining of the colon or rectum. From the time the first abnormal cells start to grow, it usually takes about 10 to 15 years for them to develop into colorectal cancer. Testing often finds these polyps, and allows them to be removed before they have the chance to turn into cancer. Screening can also result in finding colorectal cancer early, when it is highly curable.

There are several tests used to screen for colorectal cancer in those with an average risk of colorectal cancer. People who have no identified risk factors (other than age) should begin regular screening at age 50. Those who have a family history or other risk factors for colorectal polyps or cancer should talk with their doctor about starting screening at a younger age and/or getting screened at more frequent intervals.

Risk factors for colorectal cancer

A risk factor is anything that affects your chance of getting a disease such as cancer. Different cancers have different risk factors. Having a risk factor, or even several risk factors, does not mean that you will get the disease. And some people who get the disease may not have any known risk factors. Researchers have found several risk factors that may increase a person's chance of developing colorectal polyps or colorectal cancer.

Risk factors you cannot change

Age

While younger adults can develop colorectal cancer, the chances of developing colorectal cancer increase markedly after age 50. More than 90% of people diagnosed with colorectal cancer are older than 50.

Personal history of colorectal polyps or colorectal cancer

If you have a history of adenomatous polyps (adenomas), you are at increased risk of developing colorectal cancer.

Family history of colorectal cancer

Most colorectal cancers occur in people without a family history of colorectal cancer. Still, up to 20% of people who develop colorectal cancer have other family members who have been affected by this disease. Those with a history of colorectal cancer or adenomatous polyps in one or more first-degree relatives (parents, siblings, and children) are at increased risk. The risk is about doubled in those with a single affected first-degree relative, and is even higher in those with a stronger family history. Cancers can "run in the family" because of inherited genes, shared environmental factors, or some combination of these. People diagnosed with adenomatous polyps or colorectal cancer should inform other family members. Those with a family history of colorectal cancer need to talk with their doctor about the possible need to begin screening before age 50.

Finding colorectal cancer early

Most people with early colon or rectal cancer have no symptoms of the disease. Symptoms usually appear only with more advanced disease. This is why getting the recommended screening tests before any symptoms develop is so important.

If your doctor finds something suspicious during a screening exam, or if you have any of the symptoms of colorectal cancer described below, you will likely need to undergo a diagnostic workup to determine if cancer is present.

Signs and symptoms of colorectal cancer

If you have any of the following you should check with your doctor for prompt diagnosis and treatment:

- a change in bowel habits, such as diarrhea, constipation, or narrowing of the stool, that lasts for more than a few days
- a feeling that you need to have a bowel movement that is not relieved by doing so
- rectal bleeding, dark stools, or blood in the stool (often, though, the stool will look normal)
- cramping or abdominal (stomach area) pain
- weakness and fatigue

If you have any of these problems, it's important to see your doctor right away so the cause can be found and treated, if needed.

Colorectal cancer screening tests

Screening is the process of looking for cancer in people who have no symptoms of the disease.

• **Tests that can find both colorectal polyps and cancer:** These tests look at the structure of the colon itself to find any abnormal areas. This is done either with a scope or with special imaging (x-ray) tests. Polyps found before they turn cancerous can be removed, so these tests may prevent colorectal cancer. Because of this, these tests are preferred if they are available and you are willing to have them.

Tests that can find both colorectal polyps and cancer

Colonoscopy

For this test, the doctor looks at the entire length of the colon and rectum with a colonoscope. The colonoscope has a video camera on the end that is connected to a display monitor so the doctor can see and closely examine the inside of the colon. Special instruments can be passed through the colonoscope to remove any suspicious looking areas such as polyps, if needed.

During the test: The test itself usually takes about 30 minutes, although it may take longer if a polyp is found and removed. Before the colonoscopy begins, you will be given a sedating medicine to make you feel comfortable and sleepy during the procedure. Most people will be fully awake by the time they get home from the test.

If a small polyp is found, the doctor may remove it. Some small polyps may eventually become cancerous. For this reason, they are usually removed. The polyp can then be sent to a lab to be checked under a microscope to see if it has any areas that have changed into cancer. If your doctor sees a large polyp or tumor or anything else abnormal, a biopsy may be done. For this procedure, a small piece of tissue is taken out through the colonoscope. The tissue is looked at under a microscope to determine if it is a cancer or a benign (non-cancerous) growth.

CT colonography (virtual colonoscopy)

This test is an advanced type of computed tomography (CT or CAT) scan of the colon and rectum. A CT scan is an x-ray test that produces detailed images of your body. CT colonography involves the use of special computer programs to create both two dimensional x-ray pictures and a three-dimensional view of the inside of the colon and rectum, which allows the doctor to look for polyps or cancer.

This test may be especially useful for some people who can't have or don't want to have more invasive tests such as colonoscopy. It can be done fairly quickly and does not require sedation. But while this test is not invasive like colonoscopy if polyps or other suspicious areas are seen on this test, a colonoscopy will likely be needed to remove them or to explore them fully.

American Cancer Society recommendations for colorectal cancer early detection

People at average risk

The American Cancer Society believes that preventing colorectal cancer (and not just finding it early) should be a major reason for getting tested. Finding and removing polyps keeps some people from getting colorectal cancer.

Beginning at age 50, both men and women at average risk for developing colorectal cancer should use one of the screening tests below:

- colonoscopy every 10 years
- CT colonography (virtual colonoscopy) every 5 years

Additional resources

- **More information from your American Cancer Society**
- Materials may be viewed on the American Cancer Society Web site or ordered from the toll-free number, 1-800-ACS-2345.

- [Colorectal Cancer](#) (available in Spanish)
- The following books are available from the American Cancer Society. 1-800-ACS-2345
- *The American Cancer Society's Complete Guide to Colorectal Cancer*

National organizations and Web sites

- National Cancer Institute Toll-free number: 1-800-422-6237 (1-800-4-CANCER); TTY: 1-800-332-8615 Web site: <http://www.cancer.gov>

References

- American Cancer Society. *Detailed Guide: Colon and Rectum Cancer*. 2008. Available at: http://www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/CRI_2_3x.asp?dt=10.