



Colon Cancer Prevention & Early Detection

From the American Cancer Society:

Over the past few decades, more people have been surviving colon cancer, and fewer people have been dying from it. This is thanks partly to improvements in colon cancer screening. Screening, the process of looking for cancer or pre-cancer in people who have no symptoms of the disease, can find colon cancer early, before symptoms develop, when it's easier to treat. Screening can also sometimes find growths called polyps so they can be removed before they turn into cancer. The American Cancer Society recommends regular colon cancer screening for most people starting at age 50. People with a family history of the disease or other risk factors should talk with their doctor about beginning screening at a younger age.

Several different tests can be used to screen for colon cancer:

- **Colonoscopy** uses a lighted tube with a small camera on the end to examine the entire length of the colon and rectum. If polyps are found, they may be removed during the test. To prepare for the test, you may be asked to follow a special diet and use enemas or strong laxatives (called a bowel prep) to clean out your colon. Most people are sedated during the test.
- **Flexible sigmoidoscopy** is similar to colonoscopy, but examines only part of the colon and rectum. If polyps are found, they may be removed during the test, or you may need to have a colonoscopy later. Bowel prep may be required. Most people do not need to be sedated during this test. If suspicious areas are seen, a colonoscopy will be needed to look at the rest of the colon.
- **Double-contrast barium enema** is a type of x-ray test. It requires bowel prep, but no sedation.

If suspicious areas are seen on the test, a follow-up colonoscopy will be needed.

- **CT colonography** (also called virtual colonoscopy) is a scan of the colon and rectum that produces detailed cross-sectional images so the doctor can look for polyps or cancer. It requires bowel prep, but no sedation. If suspicious areas are seen on the test, a follow-up colonoscopy will be needed.
- **Fecal occult blood test and fecal immunochemical test** are used to detect tiny amounts of blood in the stool that could indicate the presence of polyps or cancer. People take these tests at home with a kit they receive from their doctor's office, along with instructions. A positive result will need to be followed up with a colonoscopy. However, many times the cause is a non-cancerous condition, such as ulcers or hemorrhoids.

Regular screening is one of the most powerful weapons for preventing colon cancer. If polyps are found during colon screening, they can usually be removed before they have the chance to turn into cancer. Screening can also result in finding cancer early, when it is easier to treat and more likely to be curable.

Lower your risk

Diet, weight, and exercise all affect your risk for colon cancer. You can help lower your risk by eating more vegetables, fruits, and whole grains, and less red meat (beef, lamb, or pork) and less processed meat (hot dogs and some luncheon meat). Men should limit alcohol to no more than 2 drinks a day, and women to no more than 1 drink a day. You can also help lower your risk for colon cancer by getting more exercise and staying at a healthy weight. Smoking also increases the risk, so if you smoke, try to **kick the habit**.