

Overview of Colon* Cancer and the Importance of Screening

Fast facts about colon cancer

1. Colon cancer is the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths among women and men combined, claiming more than 50,000 lives each year ¹
2. 90 percent of all colon cancers are found in people age 50 and older ²
3. The lifetime risk of being diagnosed with colon cancer is about one in 23³
4. Four out of five people diagnosed with colon cancer have no prior family history⁴
5. When detected early, 90 percent of colon cancers are highly treatable⁵
6. One in three adults over 50 is not getting screened ⁶

Signs and symptoms⁴

Colon cancer might not cause symptoms right away, but if it does, it may cause one or more of these symptoms:

- 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 having one
- Rectal bleeding with bright red blood
- Blood in the stool, which may make the stool look dark
- Cramping or abdominal (belly) pain
- Weakness and fatigue
- Unintended weight loss

Colon cancers can often bleed into the digestive tract. Sometimes the blood can be seen in the stool or make it look darker, but often the stool looks normal. However over time, the blood loss can build up and can lead to low red blood cell counts (anemia). Sometimes the first sign of colon cancer is a blood test showing a low red blood cell count.

Many of these symptoms can be caused by conditions other than colon cancer, such as infection, hemorrhoids, or irritable bowel syndrome. Still, 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.

Risk factors²

A risk factor is anything that affects your chance of getting a disease such as cancer. Different cancers have different risk factors. Some risk factors, like smoking, can be changed. Others, like a person's age or family history, cannot be changed.

But having a risk factor, or even many, 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 might increase a person's chance of developing colon polyps or colon cancer. "Increased risk" does not necessarily mean that an individual is at "high risk" for cancer.

* When the term colon cancer is used here, it is intended to encompass colorectal cancer – which includes both colon and rectal cancer

Several lifestyle-related factors have been linked to increased risk of colon cancer. In fact, the links between diet, weight and exercise and colon cancer risk are some of the strongest for any type of cancer. These lifestyle-related or modifiable factors include:

- Being overweight or obese
- Physical inactivity
- Certain types of diets
- Smoking
- Heavy alcohol use

There are several risk factors, however, that you cannot change including:

- Age 50 and older
- Personal history of inflammatory bowel disease (places individuals at high risk for colon cancer)
- A family history of colon cancer or adenomatous polyps (places individuals at high risk for colon cancer)
- Having an inherited syndrome that can cause family cancer syndromes (places individuals at high risk for colon cancer)
- Racial and ethnic background
 - African Americans have the highest colon cancer incidence and mortality rates of all racial groups in the United States.
 - Jews of Eastern European descent (Ashkenazi Jews) have one of the highest colon cancer risks of any ethnic group in the world.
- Type 2 diabetes

Screening options

According to the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF)[†] and the American Cancer Society (ACS), screening options include.^{7,8}

- Colonoscopy
 - Prep required
 - Hospital/outpatient clinic
 - Sedated patient
 - Tube inserted in rectum and advanced through large intestine
- Cologuard (“stool DNA”)
 - No prep required
 - At-home test
 - No diet or medication restrictions
 - Uses stool DNA and markers for blood to detect abnormal cells and blood in stool
- Fecal Occult Blood Test
 - No prep required
 - At-home test
 - May require diet restrictions
 - Tests for blood in stool

[†] Additional screening options include a fecal immunochemical test (FIT), flexible sigmoidoscopy, and CT colonography

¹ Colorectal Cancer Alliance. Statistics. Colorectal Cancer Alliance website. <https://www.ccalliance.org/get-information/what-is-colon-cancer/statistics/>. Accessed January 29, 2018.

² Colorectal Cancer Alliance. Statistics. Colorectal Cancer Alliance website. <https://www.ccalliance.org/get-information/what-is-colon-cancer/statistics/>. Accessed January 29, 2018.

³ American Cancer Society. Key Statistics for Colorectal Cancer. American Cancer Society website. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/colon-rectal-cancer/about/key-statistics.html>. Last revised January 4, 2018. Accessed January 29, 2018.

⁴ American Cancer Society. Colorectal Cancer Risk Factors. Signs and symptoms of colon cancer. American Cancer Society website. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/colon-rectal-cancer/causes-risks-prevention/risk-factors.html>. Last revised July 6, 2017. Accessed January 29, 2018.

⁵ Howlader N, Noone AM, Krapcho M, Miller D, Bishop K, Kosary CL, Yu M, Ruhl J, Tatalovich Z, Mariotto A, Lewis DR, Chen HS, Feuer EJ, Cronin KA (eds). SEER Cancer Statistics Review, 1975-2014, National Cancer Institute. Bethesda, MD, http://seer.cancer.gov/csr/1975_2014/, based on November 2016 SEER data submission, posted to the SEER web site, April 2017. Accessed February 9, 2018

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Vital signs: colorectal cancer tests save lives. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. <http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/colorectalcancerscreening>. Updated November 7, 2013. Accessed February 9, 2016.

⁷ Bibbins-Domingo K, Grossman DC, Curry SJ, et al; for US Preventive Services Task Force. Screening for colorectal cancer: US Preventive Services Task Force recommendation statement. *JAMA*. 2016;315(23):2564-2575.

⁸ American Cancer Society. American Cancer Society guidelines for early detection of cancer. American Cancer Society website. <http://www.cancer.org/health/findcancerearly/cancerscreeningguidelines/american-cancer-society-guidelines-for-the-early-detection-of-cancer>. Revised October 20, 2015. Accessed May 31, 2017.