

“My doctor says I need to get screened for colorectal cancer. Should I be concerned?”

Colorectal cancer is the second-leading cause of cancer death in the United States.

Colorectal cancer occurs when abnormal cells grow in your colon or rectum. These cells grow together and form polyps, which are very common. Polyps may be small and produce few, if any, symptoms. But over time, some polyps can become cancerous.

Colorectal cancer risk factors

Age: The risk of getting colorectal cancer increases as you get older. More than 90 percent of cases occur in people who are 50 years old or older.

Personal history: People who have a medical history that includes colorectal cancer or other cancers, inflammatory bowel diseases, or previous removal of colon polyps.

Family history: Having a parent, sibling or child who has had colorectal cancer.

Genetics: Inheriting certain genes or having certain genetic markers may be linked to an increased risk of developing colorectal cancer.

Race: African Americans are at a higher risk of getting and possibly dying from colorectal cancer when compared to other races.

Lifestyle:

- Not getting regular exercise
- Not eating enough fruits, vegetables or food with a lot of fiber
- Eating food that is high in fat and/or eating a lot of processed meats (lunch meat, sausages)
- Being overweight
- Heavy use of alcohol
- Using any tobacco product

The most effective way to reduce your risk of colorectal cancer is to get screened routinely, beginning at age 50, or when your doctor recommends it.

When should I see my doctor?

Talk with your doctor about your risk and when to start and stop screening. People usually begin regular colon screening at age 50 and continue through age 75. For people aged 76-85, the decision to screen should be up to their primary care provider, taking into account the person's overall health and prior screening history. Colorectal cancer usually doesn't cause symptoms until after it has started to spread. If any of the following symptoms occur, visit your doctor right away:

- Unexplained pain in your stomach
- Blood in your stool or very dark stools
- A change in your bowel habits, such as more frequent stools or a feeling that your bowels are not emptying completely

Screening

Screening tests can detect and/or prevent many cases of colon and rectal cancer before any symptoms appear. Some screenings include stool tests that look for blood in the stool and can be done in the privacy of your home. Other screenings, such as a colonoscopy, are procedures which must be done at your doctor's office or clinic.

At-home screening tests include fecal immunochemical tests (FIT), fecal occult blood tests (FOBT) and stool DNA tests. These tests come in kits and may be provided by your doctor at an office visit or mailed to your home.

A colonoscopy allows the doctor to see the inside of your entire colon and rectum. The doctor will use a long, flexible tube to check for polyps or cancer inside the rectum and the entire colon. During this test, your doctor may remove polyps or take tissue samples from any areas that don't look normal. The tissue will be looked at under a microscope to see if it contains cancer.

Preventing colorectal cancer

The most effective way to reduce your risk of colorectal cancer is to get screened routinely, beginning at age 50, or when your doctor recommends it, based on your risk factors.

Millions of people in the United States are not getting screened as recommended. They are missing the chance to prevent colorectal cancer or find it early, when treatment often leads to a cure.

For more information about colorectal cancer, visit fallonhealth.org. Under Quick links, click Healthwise® Knowledgebase, and search "colorectal cancer."

