

Colon cancer

Know the basics. Get screened.



Cancer is a group of diseases in which cells in the body grow out of control. One of the most common types of cancer is colorectal cancer. It is the fourth leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States.¹ So it's critical to understand the signs and symptoms of this disease and to get your screenings.

About colorectal cancer

Colorectal cancer is a cancer of the large intestine that includes the colon and the rectum. Most cases begin as small clumps of noncancerous cells called polyps. Over time, some polyps may become colon cancers.

Risk factors

Colorectal cancer can affect men and women of all races, ethnic groups, and ages. Here are some risk factors that may increase your risk of colon cancer:^{2,3}

- **Personal history of colorectal polyps**
- **Family history of colon cancer**
- **Lack of regular physical activity**
- **Low-fiber, high-fat diet**
- **Overweight and obesity**
- **Alcohol or tobacco use**
- **Inflammatory bowel disease such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease**

Symptoms

Colorectal polyps and cancer don't always cause symptoms, especially at first. You could have polyps or colorectal cancer and not know it. That is why getting screened regularly is so important. If you do have symptoms, they may include:^{3,4}

- Blood in or on your stool (bowel movement)
- Pains, aches or cramps in your stomach that don't go away
- Unexplained weight loss
- Change in bowel habits such as diarrhea or constipation
- Fatigue

Get screened

Screenings can find precancerous polyps (abnormal growths) so that they can be removed before turning into cancer. It can also help find colorectal cancer at an early stage, when treatment may lead to a cure.⁵

Types of tests⁶

There are several ways to screen for colon cancer. Talk with your doctor about which test is right for you.

- **Stool test**
Checks for blood in your stool
- **Sigmoidoscopy**
A small flexible scope is used to view only the lower part of your colon. Sigmoidoscopy and a stool test are sometimes used together.
- **Colonoscopy**
It's similar to a sigmoidoscopy, but your doctor can see your entire colon. It is the most thorough test. Your doctor can also take tissue samples (biopsies) for analysis and remove polyps during the procedure.

You will need to cleanse your bowel both the day before and the day of your colonoscopy. Medicine will be given during your colonoscopy to make you sleepy and relaxed.
- **CT Colonography (Virtual Colonoscopy)**
Uses X-rays and computers to produce images of the entire colon.

Primary treatment options

The type of treatment your doctor recommends will depend largely on the stage of your cancer.

- Surgery
- Chemotherapy
- Radiation



Start talking with your doctor about screening at age 45, or sooner if you have an increased risk for colon cancer. Your doctor can recommend when to start and how often you should be tested.

Important ways to lower your risk⁵



Get your recommended screenings



Eat a healthy diet



Increase your physical activity



Limit alcohol consumption



Avoid tobacco



1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Colorectal Cancer Statistics." https://www.cdc.gov/colorectal-cancer/statistics/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/colorectal/statistics/index.htm (June 13, 2024) (last reviewed May 17, 2018/last updated June 12, 2018).

2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Colon Cancer Risk Factors." https://www.cdc.gov/colorectal-cancer/risk-factors/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/colorectal/basic_info/risk_factors.htm (Oct 17, 2024)

3. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. "Colon cancer." <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/colon-cancer/symptoms-causes/syc-20353669> (Dec 19, 2024).

4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Symptoms of Colorectal Cancer." https://www.cdc.gov/colorectal-cancer/symptoms/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/colorectal/basic_info/symptoms.htm (June 12, 2024).

5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Reducing Risk for Colorectal Cancer." https://www.cdc.gov/colorectal-cancer/prevention/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/colorectal/basic_info/prevention.htm (June 20, 2024).

6. National Institutes of Health. "Colon cancer screening." <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002071.htm> (Aug 12, 2024).

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