Prevention is your best ally

Learn the basics of colorectal cancer and why screenings matter

Over our lifetimes, about one in 20 of us will develop colon cancer, also called colorectal cancer. When it is caught early, survival rates are better than 60 percent. That’s why regular screenings are so important.

What is colon cancer?

Your colon is part of your large intestine. It absorbs water from the food you eat and turns the rest into waste. Most of the time, colon cancer starts as a growth called a polyp inside the colon or rectum. Preventive screenings help your doctor make sure you’re healthy or find issues early when they may be easier to treat.

Colon cancer doesn’t usually cause symptoms early on, so you should have regular checkups for colon cancer when your doctor recommends, depending on your risk factors. Some risk factors include:

- Aging
- Having type 2 diabetes
- Being African American or a Jewish person of Eastern European heritage
- Having a personal or family history of colorectal cancer or polyps
- Having a history of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)

Talk with your health care provider about how often you should be screened, and when you should start.

Stay in the know

Visit webmd.com/colorectal-cancer to see the latest research and news, take a colon cancer risk assessment, find support groups and more.

3 American Society of Colon & Rectal Surgeons: The colon: What it is, what it does, why it is important (accessed June 2018): fascrs.org.

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What to expect at a screening

Some screenings for colorectal cancer can even be done at home following instructions from your doctor.

For most kinds of screenings, you’ll need to follow a certain diet for a day or two ahead of time. For the tests you’d have at your provider’s office, you’ll need to take laxatives or use an enema so your colon is empty. During the screening your doctor can give you a sedative to help you be more comfortable. During the test your doctor may remove polyps, which are small growths that can become cancerous, and send them and any biopsy tissue samples to a lab to be examined by a pathologist.

What can I do to prevent colon cancer?

Some risk factors, like your age, medical history or heritage, are things you can’t control. But there are other things you can do to lower your risk for colon cancer.

- **Eat a plant-based diet.** A diet high in vegetables, fruits and whole grains lowers your risk of colorectal cancer. Eating a lot of red meat or processed meat raises your risk.
- **Get moving.** An active lifestyle reduces your risk.
- **Stay at a healthy weight.** Being very overweight or obese increases the risk of colon cancer, especially in men.
- **Limit alcohol.** Heavy drinking has been linked to colorectal cancer. Have no more than one (for women) or two (for men) drinks a day.
- **Stay away from cigarettes.** Smoking makes you more likely to develop colorectal cancer. If you smoke, talk to your doctor about quitting.

The most important thing you can do to prevent colon cancer is to get screened. Talk to your health care provider about your family history and risk factors, and what screening schedule is right for you.

Get screened

Early detection is your best protection against colon cancer. Preventive screenings can help your health care provider find issues early when they’re easier to treat.