

Understanding Colorectal Cancer

Colorectal cancer is the second-leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States. By the time symptoms occur, it can be too late to treat these cancers. But colorectal cancer screenings can detect these cancers early and save thousands of lives each year. Yours could be one of them.

According to the American Cancer Society, more than 153,000 people will be diagnosed with colorectal cancer in the United States in 2007, with nine out of 10 being 50 or older. Of those, more than 52,000 are expected to die of the disease.

Although colorectal cancer is the second-leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States, the death rate from colorectal cancer has been declining for the past 20 years. This is probably because people are eating healthier, taking advantage of improved treatments and discovering their cancers earlier through regular screenings.

The American Cancer Society recommends colorectal screenings begin at age 50. If your mother, father, brother or sister has had the disease or you suffer from inflammatory bowel disease, screenings should begin earlier. These tests can detect problems long before symptoms occur and greatly increase your chances of survival.

There are three options for colorectal cancer screening:

- A fecal occult blood test and flexible sigmoidoscopy at age 50. Thereafter, a yearly fecal occult blood test and a flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years.
- A double contrast barium enema at age 50 and every five to 10 years thereafter.
- A colonoscopy at age 50 and a colonoscopy every 10 years thereafter.

Speak to your physician to determine which test is right for you.

Know the Risk Factors

Colorectal cancer begins as small non-cancerous clumps of cells called polyps. Over time, some of these polyps become cancerous. No one knows the exact cause of colorectal cancer, but known risk factors include:

- A family history of colorectal cancer
- A personal history of colorectal cancer, polyps or inflammatory bowel disease such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease
- Smoking
- A high-fat, low-fiber diet
- Lack of exercise
- Obesity
- Being older than 50

Watch for these symptoms:

- A change in bowel habits such as diarrhea, constipation or narrowing of the stool that lasts more than a few days
- A feeling that you have to have a bowel movement that doesn't go away even though you've had a bowel movement
- Bleeding from the rectum or blood in the stool
- Cramping or steady stomach pain

Unfortunately, the disease may be advanced before symptoms occur, so regular screenings are the best defense.

Follow these prevention guidelines:

- Eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables and lots of whole grains every day
- Avoid high-fat, low-fiber foods
- Exercise regularly and maintain a healthy body weight
- Stop smoking

Regular exercise is particularly important, as it may cut your colon cancer risk in half. That's because exercise stimulates movement through your bowels and reduces the time your colon is exposed to harmful substances that may cause cancer.

Try to get at least 30 minutes of exercise almost every day.