

# Colorectal Cancer Screening Choices

## What is colorectal cancer?

Colorectal cancer is cancer of the large intestine. This cancer is an important health problem in the United States. It is the second leading cause of cancer death in the U.S. Americans have about one chance in seventeen of getting colorectal cancer at some point in their lives. Men and women face the same risk. Increasing age, a high-fat diet, and a family history of colorectal cancer all heighten the risk. Fortunately, there is good evidence that finding colorectal cancer early and treating it reduces the risk of dying from this cancer.

## How can colorectal cancer be found early?

Early colorectal cancers usually have no symptoms. However, there are several screening tests available which can identify early colorectal cancers before symptoms develop. Beginning at age 50, both men and women should have a screening test. People with certain digestive diseases (such as ulcerative colitis) or a family history of colon cancer or colon polyps may need earlier and more frequent testing.

## What are my choices for colorectal cancer screening?

### Screening options for patients with an average risk for colon cancer include:

- **Colonoscopy every 10 years.** For a colonoscopy, a doctor who specializes in performing this test (a gastroenterologist) inserts a long, flexible tube with a camera into the rectum to see what is going on in the whole large intestine. The test is done with sedation and you will need someone to drive you home after the test is finished. You will also need to prepare for this test the day before by drinking a mixture that helps empty your bowels. The colonoscopy is the most thorough screening test for colon cancer. If the doctor sees what looks like a cancer, he or she is able to take a biopsy. The doctor can also remove polyps through the scope, without surgery, to prevent a cancer from forming in the future. Many doctors believe that colonoscopy is the best screening test for colorectal cancer, but the test does have a small risk of complications. About one person in 400 may have a problem such as serious bleeding, colon perforation or infection. Although the risk is small, it is higher than the risks with any other colorectal cancer screening test.
- **Fecal occult blood test (FOBT) every year.** For this test, you use a home kit to collect small samples of stool. Then you mail the samples back to your primary care clinician's office, where they are checked for invisible traces of blood. If results are positive, you will need to have a colonoscopy.
- **Flexible sigmoidoscopy every 5 years.** For this exam, the doctor inserts a flexible lighted tube into the rectum to look directly at the last two feet or so of

the large intestine. This is a part of the intestine where cancers often form. You do not need anaesthesia for a sigmoidoscopy. The test may be uncomfortable. The test usually takes less than fifteen minutes. Like the colonoscopy, this test also requires preparation the day before to clean out the lower bowel so the doctor can see the intestine more clearly.

- **Double-contrast barium enema every 5 years.** An x-ray of the entire colon. If the test shows an abnormality, the doctor will recommend a colonoscopy so that a biopsy can be done.
- **CT colonography(virtual colonoscopy) every 5 years.** This newer screening test for colorectal cancer uses a computerized scanner to take images of the entire bowel. These images allow a radiologist to determine if polyps or cancer are present. The difference between this test and a traditional colonoscopy is that you do not have to be sedated. You are still required to prepare for the test by cleaning out your bowels. If something abnormal is seen, you will need to have a traditional colonoscopy so that a tissue sample can be taken. Not all insurers pay for this test. Before deciding on this option, it's a good idea to contact your insurance company to find out whether you are covered for a virtual colonoscopy screening test. The phone number is usually on your insurance card.

### **Which tests should you have?**

There is not enough evidence to say which screening method is the best for everyone.

- Traditional colonoscopy is the most thorough method but it takes longer, requires sedation, is slightly riskier and is the most expensive test. The advantage is that you only need to have this test done once every ten years. Many doctors believe that it is the best alternative for most people.
- Another alternative is to combine the fecal occult blood test, done every year, with a sigmoidoscopy test every five years.
- A virtual colonoscopy every five years. Some doctors now believe that this non-invasive alternative is a good choice for many people.

Your primary care clinician can give you more printed information about how to do the stool blood test and what to expect when you go for a sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy. Because this is a serious decision, it is a good idea to talk with your primary care clinician about what screening strategy is right for you.

*This document is intended to provide health related information so that you may be better informed.*

*It is not a substitute for your doctor's medical advice and should not be relied upon for treatment for specific medical conditions.*