

# What is Colorectal Cancer?

*"So we are here today to talk about colorectal cancer screening. Because of your family history of colon cancer, I recommend you undergo a colonoscopy."* – Doctor

Many people aged 50 and older develop polyps. Left untreated, polyps can, over time, develop into colorectal cancer. Removing polyps can prevent the development of cancer. It is estimated that nearly a third of all colorectal cancer deaths could be prevented if people over the age of 50 were screened on a regular basis.

Regular screening tests are the only way to detect and remove polyps before they become cancerous or detect colorectal cancer in its earliest stages, when treatment is most effective. To better understand why, let's look at how colorectal cancer can develop.

The digestive tract is the system in your body that takes in food, absorbs its nutrients and gets rid of waste. The colon and rectum are part of your digestive system, and the place where colorectal cancer can develop.

Normally the inside walls of the colon are smooth and under strict growth restrictions. This means that cells stop growing when they touch each other. They cannot bunch together, overlap, or stack on top of one another.

Over time, errors can occur in some of the cells and they lose their strict growth restrictions. They can bunch together, overlap, and stack up, forming a polyp. A polyp may look like a bump on the normally smooth walls of the colon.

In time, additional errors can occur in the cells of some polyps and those polyps can grow into a cancerous tumor. You may not notice any obvious symptoms until the cancer is large and has spread. At that point the possibility of curing the cancer is reduced. Fortunately, regular screening tests can detect pre-cancerous polyps that can be removed before they become cancerous, or find cancer in an early, curable stage.

The American Cancer Society recommends people at average risk begin screening by the age of 50. For people at a higher than normal risk, earlier and more frequent testing is recommended. This includes anyone who previously had a polyp removed, anyone who has already had colon cancer, breast cancer or ovarian cancer, or anyone who has had an inflammatory bowel disease for a significant amount of time. Family history is also very important. Anyone with a blood relative who has had colon polyps or colon cancer may be at an increased risk.

Talk to your healthcare provider about your risk factors and when you should begin screening tests.

Today there are several options for colorectal cancer screening. These include fecal occult blood tests, stool DNA test, a colonoscopy, CT colonography, flexible sigmoidoscopy, and double contrast barium enema. Talk to your healthcare provider about the best screening option for you.