

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.”

Many people age 45 and older develop polyps. Left untreated, polyps can turn into colorectal cancer. Removing polyps can prevent this from happening.

Nearly a third of people at risk for colorectal cancer have never been screened.

Screening saves lives.

Regular screening tests are the only way to find and remove polyps before they become cancer. Screening can find colorectal cancer in its earliest stages. That's 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. They are where colorectal cancer can grow.

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. They lose their strict growth limits. 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, more errors can occur in the cells of some polyps. Those polyps can grow into cancer.

You may not have any symptoms until the cancer is large and has spread. At that point, it's harder to cure.

But regular screening tests can find polyps and cancer in an early, curable stage.

The American Cancer Society advises people at average risk to start screening by age 45.

For people at a higher risk, earlier and more often testing is advised. 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 long 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 start screening tests.

Today there are several options for colorectal cancer screening. These include: fecal occult blood tests, stool DNA test, colonoscopy, CT colonography (starting at age 45 or younger if at higher risk), and flexible sigmoidoscopy.

Talk to your healthcare provider about the best screening option for you.