

What is cancer of the colon and rectum?

Cancer is a growth inside your body that should not be there. Cancer in the colon and rectum is often called colorectal cancer. But in this brochure we use the term colon cancer to mean both colon and rectum cancers.

Most colon cancers start from polyps (see picture inside) in the colon or rectum, shown in blue in the drawing inside. Over time, polyps can turn into cancer.

Is colon cancer common among Alaska Natives?

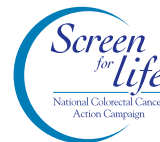
Yes, colon cancer occurs more often among Alaska Natives than among other racial or ethnic groups. Most of the time, colon cancer is found in people age 50 or older, but people younger than 50 can get it, too.



Colorectal Cancer Screening A Circle of Health for Alaskans



For More Information Contact:



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)
www.cdc.gov/screenforlife

What are the symptoms of colon cancer?

In the early stages of colon cancer, there are often no symptoms. This means that someone could have colon cancer and not know it. That is why it is important to be tested regularly.

Of course, colon cancer can sometimes have symptoms:

- blood in or on the bowel movement
- pain, aches, or cramps in the abdomen that you can't explain
- losing weight for no reason you know of

Many other health problems can cause these symptoms, too. If you have any of these symptoms, see your doctor. Only your doctor can tell you why you're having them.



Who should get a colon cancer screening test?

If you are 50 or older, you should start getting regular tests for colon cancer. There are different kinds of screening tests. Talk with your doctor about which test you should get. Tests can find polyps and can also find colon cancer early. When colon cancer is found early, medical treatment works best and can save your life.

Does someone in your family have colon cancer?

You have a greater chance of developing colon cancer if someone in your family has had colon cancer or polyps. So it is very important to tell this to your doctor. Your doctor may want to test you earlier (before age 50) and more often than other people.

Types of colon cancer screening tests

Several different screening tests can be used to find polyps or colorectal cancer. Each can be used alone. Sometimes they are used in combination with each other. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends colorectal cancer screening for men and women aged 50-75 using high-sensitivity fecal occult blood testing (FOBT), sigmoidoscopy, or colonoscopy. Talk to your doctor about which test or tests are right for you. The decision to be screened after age 75 should be made on an individual basis. If you are older than 75, ask your doctor if you should be screened.

High-Sensitivity FOBT (Stool Test)

There are two types of FOBT: one uses the chemical guaiac to detect blood. The other — a fecal immunochemical test (FIT) — uses antibodies to detect blood in the stool. You receive a test kit from your health care provider. At home, you use a stick or brush to obtain a small amount of stool. You return the test kit to the doctor or a lab, where the stool samples are checked for anything unusual.

Blood in the stool can be a sign of colon cancer, but

several other things may cause blood to be in the bowel movement. Some of these things may be more common to Alaska Natives. They include:

- Eating Native and other meats before the test.
- Bleeding from the stomach or other places in your body.
- A common stomach germ, called H. pylori, that can cause bleeding.

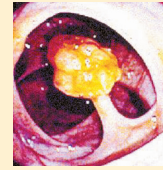
For these reasons, this test may not be the first choice for Alaska Natives. Talk to your doctor about having this test.

Flexible Sigmoidoscopy

For this test, the doctor puts a short, thin, flexible, lighted tube into your rectum. The doctor checks for polyps or cancer inside the rectum and lower third of the colon.

Colonoscopy

This is similar to flexible sigmoidoscopy, except the doctor uses a longer, thin, flexible, lighted tube to check for polyps or cancer inside the rectum and the entire colon. During the test, the doctor can find and remove most polyps and some cancers.



Polyp in Colon

Terms you may hear your doctor say

Colon

The same thing as the large intestine. It is about six feet long. Food you eat passes through the colon, where it turns into waste matter, or bowel movement.

Rectum

The last eight to ten inches of the large intestine. Bowel movements travel through the rectum and pass out of the body through the anus.

Polyp

A growth inside the colon or rectum that is not normal. (See the picture to the left.) These growths sometimes turn into cancer if they are not removed.

Gastroenterologist

A doctor who is an expert on diseases of the colon, rectum, stomach, and small intestine.

