

# WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT COLORECTAL CANCER SCREENING

Colorectal cancer is cancer of the colon (large intestine) or rectum (end of the large intestine). It is one of the most common types of cancer in both men and women.

Surgery can cure colorectal cancer if it is found early. Cancers found later may not be curable.

Screening checks for cancer in people who have no cancer symptoms. Colorectal cancer screening helps patients by:

- 1) finding and removing noncancer growths (polyps) before they become cancer
- 2) finding cancer early, when it can be cured.

Adults should begin colorectal cancer screening at age 50 years. People with family members with colorectal cancer should ask their doctors if they should be screened before age 50.

## Tests used to screen for colorectal cancer

Test (Frequency)	What is it?	Advantages	Disadvantages
Fecal occult blood test (every year)	Uses a chemical to test for blood in stool	Inexpensive; Samples taken at home, then sent to laboratory	Many things besides colorectal cancer cause blood in stool; Any positive test needs follow-up colonoscopy
Barium enema (every 5 years)	X-rays of the abdomen after an enema that contains barium	No sedation	Any positive test needs follow-up colonoscopy; Can cause discomfort
Flexible sigmoidoscopy (every 5 years)	Doctor looks into the rectum and lower colon through a short, flexible tube-shaped instrument	No sedation; Does not need to be done by a specialist	Only looks at the lower one third of the colon, can miss cancers higher up; Any positive test needs follow-up colonoscopy; Requires a laxative to clean out the colon
Colonoscopy (every 10 years)	Doctor looks into the entire rectum and colon through a long, flexible tube-shaped instrument	Can take samples of the colon (biopsies) and remove polyps during the procedure; Examines the entire colon	Requires patient to see a specialist; Sedation needed; Complications rare, but can be serious; Requires a laxative to clean out the colon before test
Virtual colonoscopy (best frequency unknown)	Computerized X-rays of the colon	Examines whole colon; Sedation not needed	Cannot take samples during this test; Any positive test needs follow-up colonoscopy; Requires a laxative to clean out the colon before the test

## Web Sites with Good Information about Colorectal Cancer Screening

### American Cancer Society

[www.cancer.org/docroot/LRN/LRN\\_0.asp?dt=10](http://www.cancer.org/docroot/LRN/LRN_0.asp?dt=10)

### Centers for Disease Control

[www.cdc.gov/cancer/colorectal/sfl/](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/colorectal/sfl/)

### National Cancer Institute

[www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Detection/colorectal-screening](http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Detection/colorectal-screening)