



**Dedicated** Senior  
Medical Center

# Protect Your Colon Health as You Age

What seniors should know  
about prevention, screening,  
and early detection.



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## What Is Colorectal Cancer?

Colorectal cancer is cancer that starts in the colon or rectum. These are parts of your digestive system that help your body process food and remove waste.

Most colorectal cancers begin as small growths called polyps. Polyps are common, especially as people get older. Most polyps are not harmful, but some types can slowly develop into cancer over time.

The encouraging news is that screening can find and remove polyps before they become cancerous. This makes colorectal cancer one of the most preventable cancers when regular screening is part of your routine healthcare.

Colorectal cancer is also one of the most common cancers in adults. While hearing the word “cancer” can be frightening, many people are successfully treated, especially when the disease is found early. Understanding your risk and staying up to date with recommended screenings are important steps you can take to protect your health.

# Why Colon Health Matters as You Age

As we age, the risk of developing colorectal cancer increases. Most cases occur in adults over age 50, which is why doctors place such strong emphasis on screening for older adults.

## Why is colon cancer hard to notice early?

Early colorectal cancer often causes no symptoms at all. Many people feel completely well and may not realize anything is wrong. This is one reason screening is so important. Screening tests can find changes in the colon long before symptoms appear.

## Why does screening matter?

### Screening tests can:

- Find polyps before they turn into cancer
- Detect cancer at an early stage
- Improve the success of treatment
- Reduce the risk of serious complications

Early detection saves lives. When colorectal cancer is found early, treatment is often simpler and more effective.

## Does aging affect colon health?

Yes. As the body ages, natural changes in cells can increase the chance that abnormal growths develop in the colon. These changes happen slowly over many years, which is why regular checkups and screening are recommended.

Most adults at average risk should begin colorectal cancer screening around age 45 to 50, depending on their health history. Some people may need to begin earlier if they have certain risk factors.

Your healthcare team can help you decide on the screening schedule that is best for you.

# Are You at Higher Risk?

Anyone can develop colorectal cancer, but some people have a higher risk than others.

## You may be at increased risk if you:

- Are age 50 or older
- Have a personal history of colon polyps
- Have a family history of colorectal cancer
- Have inflammatory bowel disease (such as Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis)
- Smoke or have smoked in the past
- Are overweight or obese
- Eat a diet high in red or processed meats
- Are physically inactive

Having one or more of these risk factors does not mean you will develop cancer. However, understanding your risk can help you and your doctor decide when screening should begin and how often it should be done.

For example, if a close family member, such as a parent, sibling, or child, has had colorectal cancer, your doctor may recommend earlier or more frequent screening.

Being aware of your risk helps you take proactive steps to protect your health.



# Signs and Symptoms to Watch For

Many people with early colorectal cancer do not experience symptoms. However, as the disease develops, some warning signs may appear.

## Possible symptoms include:

- ▶ Changes in bowel habits, such as diarrhea or constipation that lasts more than a few days
- ▶ Blood in the stool or rectal bleeding
- ▶ Dark or tar-colored stools
- ▶ Ongoing stomach discomfort, cramping, gas, or bloating
- ▶ Feeling that the bowel does not empty completely
- ▶ Unexplained weight loss
- ▶ Unusual tiredness or weakness

Some people may experience fatigue because slow blood loss from the colon can lead to low iron levels.

These symptoms can be caused by many conditions other than cancer, such as hemorrhoids or digestive issues. However, if symptoms persist or feel unusual for you, it is important to contact your healthcare provider.

Paying attention to changes in your body and reporting them early can help identify problems sooner.

# Screening Saves Lives

Because early colorectal cancer often has no symptoms, screening is one of the most powerful tools for prevention.

Screening tests can detect polyps before they become cancerous. They can also identify cancer in its earliest stages, when treatment is most successful.

**There are several types of screening tests available, including:**



## Colonoscopy

A colonoscopy allows your doctor to examine the inside of your colon using a thin, flexible tube with a small camera. If polyps are found, they can often be removed during the same procedure, helping prevent cancer from developing.

Most people at average risk need a colonoscopy every 10 years, though your doctor may recommend a different schedule based on your health history.



## Stool-Based Tests

Some screening tests can be done at home. These tests check your stool for hidden blood or abnormal DNA that may indicate cancer or precancerous polyps.

These tests are typically done once a year. If results are abnormal, your doctor will usually recommend a colonoscopy to investigate further.



## Choosing the Right Test

Your healthcare provider can help you decide which screening option is best for you.

The most important step is not which test you choose. It's getting screened regularly.

# What to Expect During a Colonoscopy

Many people feel nervous about having a colonoscopy. Understanding what happens during the procedure can help ease concerns.

A colonoscopy is usually performed at a hospital or outpatient medical center. Before the test, you will receive instructions to help clean out your colon so the doctor can see clearly during the procedure.

## During the colonoscopy:

- You will be given medication to help you relax or sleep
- The doctor gently inserts a thin, flexible tube into the rectum
- A small camera allows the doctor to examine the lining of the colon
- If polyps are found, they can often be removed immediately

The procedure usually takes less than an hour. Because sedation is commonly used, you will need someone to drive you home afterward.

Most people return to normal activities the next day.



# Preparing for Your Screening Test

Preparation instructions may vary depending on the screening method used.

If you are having a colonoscopy, you will likely need to follow a special diet and take a bowel-cleansing preparation the day before the procedure. This helps ensure the doctor can clearly see the colon.

## Before your screening test:

- Follow the preparation instructions carefully
- Tell your doctor about medications you take
- Ask if any medications should be paused before the procedure
- Arrange transportation home if sedation will be used
- Write down any questions you have for your doctor

**Good preparation helps ensure the screening test provides accurate results.**



# Small Steps to Support Colon Health

Screening is the most effective way to prevent colorectal cancer, but everyday habits also play an important role in colon health. Healthy lifestyle choices can reduce risk and support overall well-being.



## Eat fiber-rich foods

Fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains contain fiber that helps keep digestion regular and supports colon health. and spices instead of salt.



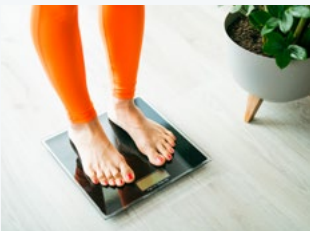
## Limit red and processed meats

Eating large amounts of red meat or processed meats such as bacon, sausage, and deli meats has been linked to higher colorectal cancer risk.



## Stay physically active

Regular movement supports digestion, helps maintain a healthy weight, and reduces inflammation. Even walking for 20 to 30 minutes most days can be beneficial.



## Maintain a healthy weight

Excess body weight is associated with increased colorectal cancer risk. Balanced eating and regular physical activity can help support a healthy weight.



## Avoid tobacco and limit alcohol

Smoking and heavy alcohol use can increase the risk of several cancers, including colorectal cancer. Small changes over time can lead to meaningful improvements in long-term health.

# What Happens if Cancer is Found?

If colorectal cancer is detected, your care team will guide you through the next steps and develop a treatment plan tailored to your needs.

## Treatment depends on several factors, including:

- The stage of the cancer
- The location of the tumor
- Your overall health
- Your personal preferences

## Surgery

Surgery is often the primary treatment for early-stage colorectal cancer. During surgery, the doctor removes the tumor along with a small portion of surrounding tissue.

## Chemotherapy

Some people may need chemotherapy after surgery to reduce the chance that the cancer will return. Chemotherapy may also be used if cancer has spread beyond the colon.

## Additional Treatments

In certain situations, other treatments such as radiation therapy or targeted medications may be recommended.

Your healthcare team may include specialists such as gastroenterologists, surgeons, oncologists, nurses, and care coordinators. Together, they work to ensure you receive coordinated and supportive care.

When colorectal cancer is found early, treatment outcomes are often very positive.





## Questions to Ask Your Doctor About Colon Health

Having open conversations with your healthcare provider can help you stay informed and confident about your care.

### You may want to ask:

- When should I start colorectal cancer screening?
- How often should I be screened?
- Which screening test is best for me?
- What symptoms should I watch for?
- How can my lifestyle affect my risk?

Writing down questions before appointments can help ensure you get the information you need.

# Talk With Your Doctor

Colorectal cancer is common, but it is also one of the most preventable cancers.

## Remember:

- Screening can find problems early
- Early cancer often has no symptoms
- Healthy habits support long-term colon health
- You are not alone. Your care team is here to help

If you are unsure about your screening schedule, ask your doctor at your next visit.

Taking action today can protect your health for years to come.

## Take the Next Step Toward Better Colon Health

Regular screening and open conversations with your care team are important steps in protecting your health as you age. If you have questions about colorectal cancer screening or want guidance on lowering your risk, talk with your doctor during your next visit.

### Schedule your screening today!

Visit [Find a Location](#) to find a center near you or call **(844) 892-2273** to learn more about our centers and how our care teams can support you.