Colorectal Cancer: Should You Be Tested?

Preventive recommendations from Aurora Health Care for healthy, normal-risk persons:

Men and women age 50 and older should be screened with one of the following:

- **Colonoscopy every 10 years.** Colonoscopy is the preferred test. The test looks inside the colon and finds both polyps and cancer. Polyps can be removed during the test, which can prevent cancer from forming.
- **Other tests for screening (if anything is found, a colonoscopy will be needed)**
  - Flexible sigmoidoscopy and CT colonography (virtual colonoscopy) every 5 years. These tests look for polyps and colon cancer.
  - Fecal occult blood test every year – checks the stool for blood, which might mean cancer.
  - Fecal DNA test (Cologuard®) every 3 years – checks the stool for both altered DNA and blood, which might mean cancer.

What is colorectal cancer?

Colorectal cancer is cancer of the colon or rectum, both of which make up the large bowel. This is one cancer that can be **prevented** by doing screening. It usually starts as small benign growths called polyps. Not all polyps turn into cancer. Those that do may take years to turn into cancer. So, removing small polyps early can help prevent this cancer. If cancer is already present, finding the cancer early makes the chance for a cure much better.

Should you be tested?

Everyone is at some risk for colorectal cancer. It affects men and women equally. In early stages of colorectal cancer, there are often no symptoms, so regular screening is important.

- The primary risk factor is age. More than 90 percent of colorectal cancer cases are in people over age 50. That’s why everyone should be screened at age 50 if not already done.
- You are at higher risk and may need screening earlier if:
  - You or someone in your family has had colorectal cancer or polyps
  - You have inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn’s disease or ulcerative colitis)
  - You have a history of endometrial, ovarian or breast cancer

What are the symptoms?

Colorectal cancer is most curable when found before it causes symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they might include:

- Changes in bowel habits
- Rectal bleeding or blood in the stool (bright red or very dark)
- Abdominal (stomach) cramps or frequent gas pains or bloating
- Unexplained weight loss or fatigue

What can you do to decrease your risk of colorectal cancer?

Talk with your health care provider about your family history and other possible risk factors for cancer. Ask about screening tests and which test is best for you. In addition:

- Have the regular preventive screening tests as recommended for you.
- Eat a well-balanced diet, especially fruits and vegetables, along with a good intake of calcium, folate and fiber.
- Ask your doctor what your ideal weight should be and work toward that goal.
- Get at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise most, if not all, days of the week.
- Don’t smoke.
- Limit your alcohol intake.

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**What is a colonoscopy?**
A colonoscopy is a procedure during which a doctor can closely check the lining of the entire colon (large bowel). A flexible tube (about the thickness of your finger) with a camera on the end is passed into the anus and moved slowly into the rectum and colon.

**Preparing for your colonoscopy**
The colon must be very clean. The day before the test you will change your diet and use a prep kit ordered by your doctor to clean your bowel. Plan for someone to drive you home after the test, as you will receive medicine to relax you. Before the test, tell your provider:
- The medicines you take regularly, especially if you take a “blood thinner” or aspirin.
- Any allergies you have.

**During your colonoscopy**
You will be lying on your side or back and will be given medicine to help you relax and stay comfortable. Air is put into the bowel through the tube to widen the colon so the doctor can see the bowel and remove polyps. If an area needs to be looked at more closely, a sample of the colon lining will be taken (biopsy) for further testing.
The procedure will last about 20 minutes.

**After your colonoscopy**
Most patients have no memory of the test. You will be watched until the medicine effect wears off. Your provider will explain the results. You will be told when you can eat and be active.
You will not be allowed to drive home, so please arrange for someone to pick you up.

You may have cramping or bloating from the air that was put into the bowel. This should go away when you pass gas. Complications after colonoscopy are rare. **Call your health care provider if you have severe pain in your abdomen, fever and chills, or rectal bleeding.**

**What is a flexible sigmoidoscopy?**
A flexible sigmoidoscopy is a procedure that allows for a close check of the lining of the rectum and part of the colon. It checks the lower one-third of the colon, while colonoscopy views the entire colon. Your provider will give you instructions for the prep to clean your bowel.

Medicine for relaxation is not usually needed for a flexible sigmoidoscopy. During the test, if an area needs to be looked at more closely, a sample of the colon lining will be taken (biopsy) for testing. Polyps are not removed with this test. The test takes 10 to 15 minutes. You will be told when you can eat and be active.

**What is CT colonography?**
For this test, also called virtual colonoscopy, a tube is used to put air into the bowel and widen the colon. CT (computed tomography) scan pictures are taken to look for polyps or cancer. The preparation for this test is the same as for a colonoscopy. No medicine for relaxation or recovery time is needed. No biopsies or polyp removal can be done. The test takes about 10 minutes.

**What is a fecal occult blood test?**
This is a simple screening test to find unseen blood in the stool, which can be a sign of cancer or a large bleeding polyp in the colon or rectal area. Your health care provider will give you a kit with instructions on collecting your own stool sample at home. You will be asked to mail the sample in or return it to the office.

**What is a fecal DNA (Cologuard®) test?**
This is a simple screening test intended for detection of both altered DNA and blood known to be associated with colorectal cancer and pre-cancer. A positive result may indicate the presence of colorectal cancer or advanced adenoma and should be followed by diagnostic colonoscopy. When your health care provider orders this test for you, the lab (Exact Sciences) will contact you and mail you a kit with instructions on collecting your own stool sample at home. You will be asked to mail the sample back to Exact Sciences. Exact Sciences will contact your provider with the results.

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Check with your insurance company about your coverage for these tests. Some tests may not be covered completely and there may be other costs based on what is found during the test.

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The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem.