

Colon Cancer

Colon cancer is cancer of the large intestine (colon), the lower part of your digestive system. Rectal cancer is cancer of the last several inches of the colon. Together, they're often referred to as colorectal cancers.

Most cases of colon cancer begin as small, non-cancerous (benign) clumps of cells called adenomatous polyps. Over time some of these polyps become colon cancers.

Polyps may be small and produce few, if any, symptoms. For this reason, doctors recommend regular screening tests to help prevent colon cancer by identifying polyps before they become colon cancer.

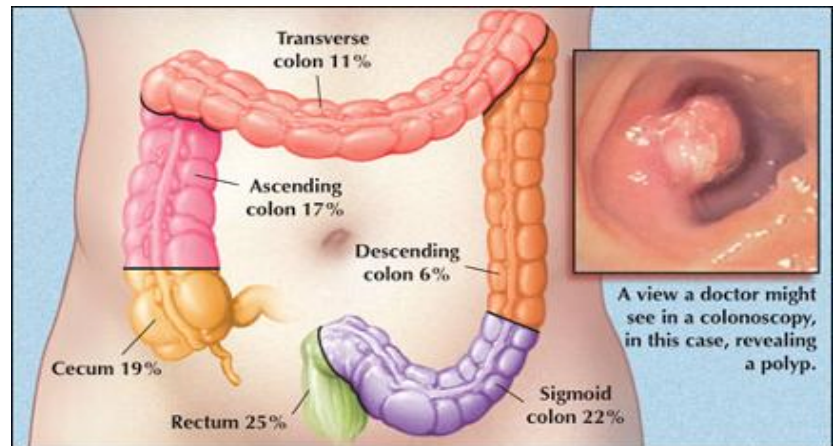
Symptoms

Early stage colorectal cancer rarely causes symptoms. Symptoms of colorectal cancer usually occur later, when the cancer is harder to treat.

You should talk to your doctor if you:

- Are age 50 or older (younger if you are at high risk)
- Have pain in your abdomen.
- Have blood in your stool or have black, tarry stools.
- Have a change in your bowel habits (such as narrow stools or frequent diarrhea or constipation).
- Experienced unexplained weight loss.
- Are constantly fatigued.

Colorectal Cancer Screening



Cancer can occur anywhere in the colon, so it's important to have screening tests that examine the entire colon. Here, the percentages represent the incidence of colon cancer in the various parts of the colon.

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Screening Tests

Colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer in men and women in the United States, and is the second leading cause of cancer deaths. Most colorectal cancer cases begin as polyps. When polyps are found, they can be removed before they become cancer or while the cancer is in its early stages.

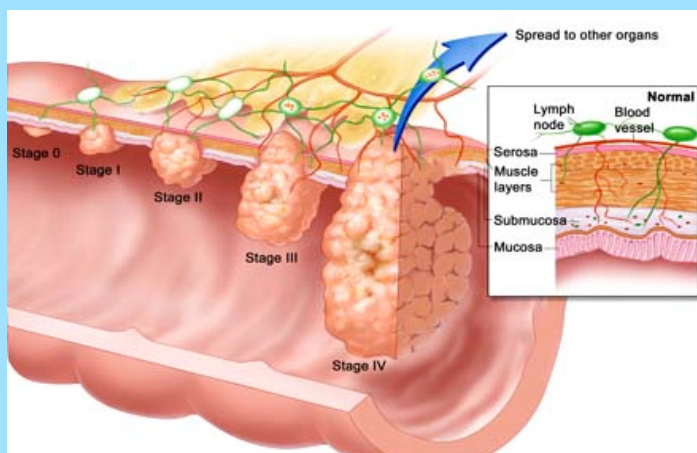
There are two groups of tests available – tests that look inside the body and those done on stools. Tests done inside the body can spot cancer and polyps (abnormal growths that may develop into cancer). Stool tests primarily focus on detecting cancer, not polyps, according to the America Cancer Society.

Here is a quick look at the recommended tests:

Colonoscopy – an exam used to detect changes or abnormalities in the large intestine and rectum. A long, flexible tube (colonoscope) is inserted into the rectum. A tiny video camera at the tip of the tube allows the doctor to view the inside of the entire colon. Colonoscopies are usually performed every 10 years.

Flexible Sigmoidoscopy – an exam used to evaluate the lower part of the colon. A thin, flexible tube (sigmoidoscope) is inserted into the rectum. A tiny video camera at the tip of the tube allows the doctor to view the inside of the rectum and most of the sigmoid colon. They are performed every 5 years.

Stool Tests – are lab tests used to check stool samples for hidden blood. These tests are usually performed yearly. Some stool tests are fecal occult blood test (FOBT), fecal immunochemical test (FIT) or a stool DNA test (sDNA).



Choosing a colon cancer screening test isn't always an easy decision, but it's a potentially lifesaving one. Consult with your doctor about your colon cancer screening options. Whatever your choice, remember that some screening is better than no screening.