

COLON CANCER SCREENING

Colon and rectal cancer - or colorectal cancer - affects the large intestine and rectum. Colon cancer is the third leading cause of cancer death among women in the United States. With routine screening, colorectal cancer can frequently be detected early enough to treat and even cure.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS:

Most of the time, colorectal cancer develops slowly. This type of cancer often begins as a benign polyp - a tissue growth in the colon or rectum. Colon and rectal cancer usually shows no signs in the early stages of the disease. In the more advanced stages, signs and symptoms include:

- ❖ A change in bowel habits
- ❖ Bleeding from the rectum
- ❖ Blood in the stool
- ❖ Stools that are more narrow than usual
- ❖ Abdominal discomfort (bloating, cramps, or frequent gas pains)
- ❖ A feeling that you need to have a bowel movement (that does not go away after a bowel movement)
- ❖ Loss of appetite
- ❖ Weakness and feeling tired

Talk to your doctor if you have any of these symptoms. If you do have any of these symptoms, it does not mean you have cancer. The same symptoms can result from other, less severe problems.

SCREENING:

Most of the time routine colorectal cancer screening begins at age 50. Tests used to detect signs of colorectal cancer include:

- ❖ Yearly fecal occult blood test (FOBT). For this test, a stool sample is checked for blood, which could be a sign of cancer of the colon or rectum.
- ❖ Flexible sigmoidoscopy every 5 years. This test involves placing a flexible lighted tube into the rectum and lower colon to look for cancer.
- ❖ Double contrast barium enema test every 5 years. For this test, a chalky substance is placed in the colon through the anus to allow X-rays to be taken.
- ❖ Colonoscopy every 10 years beginning at age 50 years. This is an exam of the entire colon using a small, a flexible lighted tube.

HIGH RISK SCREENING:

The type of tests and when to have them varies based on your risk factors. You may need to be tested earlier if you:

- ❖ Have a first degree relative younger than age 60 years with colorectal cancer or colon polyps
- ❖ Have two or more first degree relatives of any age with colorectal cancer or colon polyps
- ❖ Have had colorectal cancer
- ❖ Have had colon polyps
- ❖ Have had inflammatory bowel disease, ulcerative colitis, or Crohn's disease
- ❖ Have a family history of familial adenomatous polyposis or hereditary nonpolyposis colon cancer

PREVENTION:

Completing the recommended screening tests is the best way to prevent colorectal cancer.

You can further protect yourself by:

- ❖ Eating a diet that is high in fiber and low in fat, with plenty of fruits and vegetables
- ❖ Exercising regularly
- ❖ Maintaining a healthy weight
- ❖ Avoiding smoking cigarettes or drinking large amounts of alcohol