
Healthy Colon, Healthy Life

Anyone can get colon cancer, although it is more likely to occur in people over the age of 50. Many people with colon cancer do not have any symptoms at all. You need to get tested if you are 50 or over, even if you feel healthy. Regular screening can help prevent colon cancer. Talk with your doctor to find out which test or combination of tests is best for you.

Which colon cancer test should I have?

Your doctor may recommend one of the following:

- Fecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT) – every year
- Sigmoidoscopy – every 5 years
- Colonoscopy – every 10 years
- Double Contrast Barium Enema – every 5 years
- Combination of FOBT every year plus Sigmoidoscopy every 5 years

What is a fecal occult blood test (FOBT)?

A fecal occult blood test is also known as a stool blood test. It is done at home using a set of 3 cards to determine whether the stool contains blood. You smear a sample of your fecal matter or stool on a card from 3 separate bowel movements and return the cards to be tested. It is different from the test for parasite that uses small bottles of liquid.

Result:

- Normal: This means that no blood was found in the stool.
- Abnormal: This means that blood was found in the stool. However, there can be other reasons besides cancer for an abnormal test (like hemorrhoids, certain types of foods, or certain medications). Usually when the result is abnormal, another test is recommended to take a closer look.

What is a sigmoidoscopy?

A sigmoidoscopy is a test that examines the colon using a narrow, lighted tube that is inserted in the rectum. This test only examines the lower part of the colon. For sigmoidoscopy, you do not receive medication to make you sleepy. You are awake; you are able to drive yourself home and you are able to resume your normal activities.

Result

- Normal: This means that no abnormalities were found.
- Abnormal: This usually means that a polyp or abnormal tissue was found. If a polyp is found, it can usually be removed during the exam. A colonoscopy to look at the entire colon is usually recommended.

What is a colonoscopy?

A colonoscopy is a test that examines that colon using a longer, narrow, lighted tube that is inserted in the rectum. This test examines the entire colon. Before a colonoscopy is done, you are given a liquid to drink to cleanse your colon and are usually given medication through a needle in your arm to make you sleepy. You need someone to drive you home after the test and you may need to take the rest of the day off from your usual activities.

Result:

- Normal: This means no abnormalities were found.
- Abnormal: If a polyp or abnormal tissue was found, the doctor may remove it or take a small piece of it (a biopsy) for more testing. If cancer is found, your doctor will discuss treatment options.

What is a double contrast barium enema?

This is a test using x-rays of the colon after giving a person an enema with a liquid called barium.

Result:

- Normal: This means no abnormalities were found.
- Abnormal: If abnormalities are seen, the doctor may recommend a colonoscopy for further testing.

Common Questions

Does sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy hurt?

Most people who have had a sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy say it is not painful, but it is a little bit uncomfortable (bloating or stomach cramps). Most people say it is not as bad as they expected.

How long does a sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy take?

- A sigmoidoscopy only takes about 10-15 minutes
- A colonoscopy takes about 30 minutes

I feel healthy. Do I need to be tested?

Yes, you need to be tested. You can have polyps or cancer without any symptoms. If polyps are found, they can often be removed without surgery. If cancer is found early, it can usually be cured.

Do I ever need to check for colon cancer before age 50?

People with certain conditions or family history may need to start checking for colon cancer earlier. Talk with your doctor about whether or not you need to start checking before age 50.

Do I need to get a sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy if I am a vegetarian or if I

eat a healthy diet with very little fat or red meat?

Eating a healthy diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables, very little fat and red meat may help to decrease your chances of getting colon cancer. However, you still need to have a test to check for colon cancer.

I have decided to get tested, what do I do now?

For Fecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT)

- 3 days before testing you will have to stop eating certain foods.
- You will have to stop taking certain medications like aspirin or aspirin-like medicines.
- Your doctor will give you a list of the foods and medicines to stop.

For Sigmoidoscopy

- A few days before your test, you will have to stop certain medications. Your doctor will provide you with a list of medications to stop.
- The day before the test, you will use an enema to clean out your bowels.

For Colonoscopy

- You will have to stop certain medicines several days before your test. Your doctor will provide you with a list of these medicines.
- On the day before your test you will have to avoid eating certain foods. You will also drink a special liquid to clean out your bowels.
- On the morning of the test, you are not be allowed to eat anything.
- After the test, you may still be sleepy from the medication, so someone will need to take you home.

For Double Contrast Barium Enema

- You will be required to drink a special liquid to clean out your bowels.

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