Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

What You Can Do To Prevent Colorectal Cancer

Know Your Risk for Colorectal Cancer

16 people every hour are diagnosed with colorectal cancer in the United States.

A risk factor is anything that increases your chance of getting a disease, such as cancer. You or someone you care about may have a risk factor for colorectal cancer. Some risk factors never change, such as your age, race, health history, and your genes. However, there are healthy habits you can start to do that can lower your risk.

You may be at risk for colorectal cancer if you:

- Are age 45 or older.
- Have had precancer polyps on a screening test. Polyps are a small group of cells on the inside lining of your colon.
- Have inflammatory bowel disease, such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease.
- Have a close blood relative who was diagnosed with colorectal cancer before they were age 50.
- Have a family history of other cancers, such as stomach, urinary tract, pancreatic, uterine, and brain.

- Have certain changes in your genes, such as Lynch syndrome or familial adenomatous polyposis (A-deh-NOH-muh-tus PAH-lee-POH-sis). These conditions are rare causes of colon cancer that are hereditary (it runs in your family).
- Are overweight or obese.

Your race can also play a role in your risk for getting colorectal cancer. For example, in the United States, colorectal cancers affect the Black community at a higher rate than any other race.

There are more cases of colorectal cancer in the Black community than any other race.

What are the Symptoms of Colorectal Cancer?

Colorectal cancer often grows slowly over several years. It usually starts as a small abnormal (not normal) growth, called a polyp, on the inner lining of the colon or rectum. Some polyps later can become cancer.

Most people with early colorectal cancer do not have any symptoms. If you notice changes in your body, do not ignore them. Colorectal cancer most often affects people ages 50 and older. But there's an alarming rise in cases among people in their 20s and 30s. It's important to understand what is normal for your body so you know when to get care.

By 2030, colorectal cancer in people under age 50 is expected to double.

Make an appointment with your healthcare provider if you notice these symptoms and if they last for 2 weeks or longer:

- You see abnormal (not normal) bleeding from your rectum or blood in your stool (poop).
- You have diarrhea (loose stool), constipation (not being able to poop), or narrow stool (thin like a pencil).
- You feel an urge to poop that does not go away.
- You have pain in your abdomen (belly) that you can't explain.
- You're losing weight quickly and without trying.
- You often feel tired but you do not know why.

Why Colorectal Cancer Screening Matters

9 out of 10 people survive colorectal cancer when it's found and treated early.

There are a few types of screening tests for colorectal cancer. A colonoscopy is the test that works best. It can find and remove small growths, including precancer polyps, from the lining of your colon or rectum. This means getting a colonoscopy regularly can find and prevent cancer.

MSK recommends that people at average risk for colorectal cancer start getting screened at age 45. Learn more about colorectal cancer screening.

A colonoscopy is the best method for colorectal cancer screening. Other screening tests are available, such as ones that test your stool (poop). Stool tests are easier to do and can help find cancer. But they're not as good as a colonoscopy at finding growths that can become cancer. Based on the results of your stool test, your healthcare provider may recommend a colonoscopy.

Healthy Habits to Lower Your Risk for Colorectal Cancer

When you turn 45, it's time to schedule a colonoscopy. Talk with your healthcare provider about how often to get screened. Your screening schedule is based on your personal risk for colorectal cancer.

In between your screening tests, MSK recommends following these healthy habits to lower your risk of colorectal cancer.

- Eat less red, processed, burned, blackened, or charred meats. Bacon, hot dogs, deli meats, pepperoni, and ham are all examples of processed meats. Charred meats are cooked at high temperatures over a live flame, such as a charcoal or gas grill.
- Talk with your healthcare provider about whether taking aspirin is right for you. Some people who regularly use aspirin or other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS) may have a lower chance of getting colorectal cancer and polyps.
- Keep a healthy weight for your body.
- Eat a variety of foods high in fiber, such as whole grains, legumes (beans, nuts, peas), fruits, and vegetables.
- Limit foods with added sugars, and with trans or saturated fat.
- Do not smoke or use tobacco products. MSK's Tobacco Treatment Program has helped thousands of people to quit smoking. Our program is open to everyone, even if you do not have cancer.
- If you drink alcohol, limit how much you drink.

Colorectal screening catches cancer earlier when it is easier to treat.

Actions You Can Take Today

- Learn about your risk for colorectal cancer.
- Know the symptoms of colorectal cancer and talk with your healthcare provider about any changes in your body.
- Get screened for colorectal cancer with regular colonoscopies after you turn age 45.
- Contact our MSK CATCH clinic if you have a hereditary cancer syndrome, such as Lynch syndrome. We help people living with a hereditary cancer syndrome at high risk for cancer watch themselves for changes in their health. Close surveillance and regular cancer screenings help find cancer early when it's easier to treat.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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