

# Colorectal Cancer and Colon Cancer Screening

## What you need to know

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Colon and rectal cancers, often referred to as “colorectal cancer”, arise from the lining of the large intestine. **Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths among men and women in the United States. However, if detected early, colorectal cancer can be cured.** With simple preventive steps, you can greatly reduce your risk of developing the disease. It is important for you to understand your risks for colorectal cancer, the symptoms, and screening tests that can detect cancerous growths.

Over 130,000 cases of colorectal cancer are diagnosed and over 50,000 deaths from colorectal cancer occur in the United States each year. There is no single cause for colorectal cancer. However, almost all these cancers begin as benign polyps [adenomatous polyps] which, over a period of many years, develop into cancers. A polyp is a grape-like growth on the inside wall of the colon or rectum. Polyps grow slowly over three to tens years. In order to prevent colorectal cancer, it is important to get screened to find out if you have polyps, and to have them removed if you do. Removal of polyps has been shown to prevent colorectal cancer. Other factors that increase the risk of cancer are a family history of colorectal cancer, certain genetic syndromes and inflammatory bowel disease [ulcerative colitis and Crohn’s disease]. Dietary factors that have been associated with colorectal cancer are a high-meat, high-fat, low-fiber diet. However, some studies found that the risk is not reduced when people switch to a high-fiber diet, so the cause of the link is not yet clear. You are at average risk for colorectal cancer if you are age 50 or older and have no other risk factors.

Most cases of colorectal cancer have no symptoms. However, over time, there are a number of warning signs and symptoms: diarrhea, constipation, or other change in bowel habits that does not resolve; blood in the stool; unexplained anemia; abdominal pain and tenderness in the lower abdomen; discomfort or the urge to move your bowels when there is no need; and unexplained weight loss. If you have these symptoms, call your doctor and schedule an appointment.

Screening for cancer before a person has symptoms can help the doctor find polyps or early cancer. Finding and removing polyps may prevent colorectal cancer. Also, treatment for colorectal cancer is more likely to be effective when the disease is found early. People at average risk should start screening at age 50 years. People at increased risk start at age 40. There are several types of screening tests. Colonoscopy examines the entire colon using a long, lighted tube called a colonoscope. The procedure requires patients to be sedated, and usually takes about 20 minutes. For people of average risk, colonoscopy should be done every 10 years. Fecal Occult Blood Test [FOBT],

sigmoidoscopy, and barium enema are other screening tests that can be used. A new test, virtual colonoscopy, uses CT scan technology to visualize the colon. While this is exciting new technology for the future, it is not yet as accurate as colonoscopy. Therefore, colonoscopy remains the gold standard. Talk with your doctor about which test is best for you.

If you are diagnosed with colorectal cancer, surgery is generally required to remove the cancerous polyps and other malignant tissue. The type of surgery and follow-up treatment will depend on how far advanced the cancer is.

There is no way to completely eliminate the risk of developing colorectal cancer. However, by taking preventive measures, such as colonoscopies, you can greatly reduce your risk and possibly save your life!! If you, or someone you know, need to be screened for colon cancer, contact a gastroenterologist in your area.

Dr. Imtiaz Alam has been a well-respected gastroenterologist in Austin, TX since 1998. He has been featured many times on both local and national television because of his ongoing research and expertise in both colon and liver diseases. For appointments with Dr. Alam, call (512)719-4370.