

What is cancer of the colon and rectum?

Cancer is a growth inside your body that should not be there. Cancer in the colon and rectum is often called colorectal cancer. But in this brochure we use the term colon cancer to mean both colon and rectum cancers.

Most colon cancers start from polyps (see picture inside) in the colon or rectum, shown in blue in the drawing inside. Over time, polyps can turn into cancer.

Is colon cancer common among Alaska Natives?

Yes, colon cancer occurs more often among Alaska Natives than among other racial or ethnic groups. Most of the time, colon cancer is found in people age 50 or older, but people younger than 50 can get it, too.



Colorectal Cancer Screening A Circle of Health for Alaskans



For More Information Contact:



What are the symptoms of colon cancer?

In the early stages of colon cancer, there are often no symptoms. This means that someone could have colon cancer and not know it. That is why it is important to be tested regularly. Of course, colon cancer can sometimes have symptoms:

- blood in or on the bowel movement
- a change in bowel habits, such as having diarrhea or being constipated
- bowel movements that are thinner than usual
- pain, aches, or cramps in the abdomen that you can't explain
- frequent gas pains
- losing weight for no reason you know of



Many other health problems can cause these symptoms, too. If you have any of these symptoms, see your doctor. Only your doctor can tell you why you're having them.

Who should get a colon cancer screening test?

If you are 50 or older, you should start getting regular tests for colon cancer. There are different kinds of screening tests. Talk with your doctor about which test you should get. Tests can find polyps and can also find colon cancer early. When colon cancer is found early, medical treatment works best and can save your life.

Does someone in your family have colon cancer?

You have a greater chance of developing colon cancer if someone in your family has had colon cancer or polyps. So it is very important to tell this to your doctor. Your doctor may want to test you earlier (before age 50) and more often than other people.

Screening tests for colon cancer

Fecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT)

This test looks for hidden blood in your bowel movement. For three bowel movements in a row, you place a small piece of bowel movement on a card. Then you return the card to the doctor, and the doctor tests to see if there is blood.

Blood in the stool can be a sign of colon cancer, but several other things may cause blood to be in the bowel movement. Some of these things may be more common to Alaska Natives and include:

- Eating Native and other meats before the test
- Bleeding from the stomach or other places in your body
- A common stomach germ, called *H. pylori*, that can cause bleeding

For these reasons, this test may not be the first choice for Alaska Natives. Talk to your doctor about having this test.

Sigmoidoscopy

This test looks for polyps in the lower part of the colon.

A doctor puts a short, flexible tube inside the anus and **lower** part of the colon to allow him or her to see inside. This test should usually be done every five years.



Polyp in Colon

Colonoscopy

This test looks for polyps in the **entire** colon. A doctor puts a long, flexible tube inside the anus and in the entire colon to allow him or her to see any polyps inside. Most polyps can be removed during the test. This test is usually done every 10 years.

Double Contrast Barium Enema

This test is an x-ray of the colon. You will have an enema with a white liquid called barium. Then the doctor will take an x-ray. The barium makes it easy for the doctor to see the outline of the colon on the x-ray. This test is usually done every 5-10 years.

Terms you may hear your doctor say

Colon

The same thing as the large intestine. It is about six feet long. Food you eat passes through the colon, where it turns into waste matter, or bowel movement.

Rectum

The last eight to ten inches of the large intestine. Bowel movements travel through the rectum and pass out of the body through the anus.

Polyp

A growth inside the colon or rectum that is not normal. [See the picture to the left.] These growths sometimes turn into cancer if they are not removed.

Gastroenterologist

A doctor who is an expert on diseases of the colon, rectum, stomach, and small intestine.

