



Nursing Station

March Is National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month

Colorectal cancer screening saves lives. If everyone who is 50 years old or older were screened regularly, as many as 60% of deaths from this cancer could be avoided.

Among cancers that affect both men and women, *colorectal cancer* (cancer of the colon or rectum) is the second leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States. Every year, about 140,000 Americans are diagnosed with colorectal cancer, and more than 50,000 people die from it.

How Can You Reduce Your Risk?

The risk of getting colorectal cancer increases with age. More than 90% of cases occur in people who are 50 years old or older. Colorectal cancer screening saves lives, but many people are not being screened according to national guidelines. If you're 50 years old or older, getting a screening test for colorectal cancer could save your life. Here's how—

- Colorectal cancer screening tests can find precancerous polyps so they can be removed before they turn into cancer. In this way, colorectal cancer is prevented.
- Screening tests also can find colorectal cancer early, when treatment often leads to a cure.

What Are the Symptoms of Colorectal Cancer?

Precancerous polyps and colorectal cancer don't always cause symptoms, especially at first. You could have polyps or colorectal cancer and not know it. That is why having a screening test is so important. Symptoms for colorectal cancer may include—

- Blood in or on the stool (bowel movement).
- Stomach pain, aches, or cramps that do not go away.
- Losing weight and you don't know why.

These symptoms may be caused by something other than cancer. If you're having any of these symptoms, the only way to know what is causing them is to see your doctor.

When Should You Begin to Get Screened?

You should begin screening for colorectal cancer soon after turning 50, and then keep getting screened regularly until the age of 75. Ask your doctor if you should be screened if you're older than 75. Some people are at a higher risk than others for developing colorectal cancer. Having a personal or family history of colorectal polyps or cancer may increase your risk.

If you think you may be at high risk for colorectal cancer, talk to your doctor about when and how often to get tested.

What Are the Screening Tests for Colorectal Cancer?

Several tests are available to screen for colorectal cancer. Some are used alone; others are used in combination with each other. Talk with your doctor about which test or tests are best for you.

- Colonoscopy (every 10 years).
- High-sensitivity fecal occult blood test (FOBT), stool test, or fecal immunochemical test (FIT) (every year)
- Sigmoidoscopy (every 5 years).

How Can I Pay for Screening Tests? Many insurance plans and Medicare help pay for colorectal cancer screening. Check with your plan to find out which tests are covered for you. To find out about Medicare coverage, call [1-800-MEDICARE](tel:1-800-MEDICARE) (1-800-633-4227).