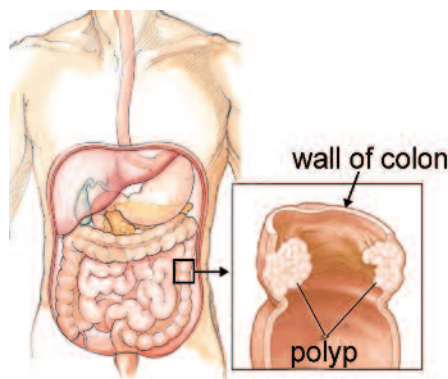




Why Should I Be Tested for Colorectal Cancer?

Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death in the United States. It is also one of the most preventable cancers. Talk with your doctor about your screening choices for this cancer. Together, you can decide on the best prevention plan.

What is colorectal cancer?



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Colorectal cancer starts in the large intestine (colon) and the rectum. This kind of cancer usually develops slowly, sometimes over many years. Most colorectal cancer begins with small groups of cells called polyps. Polyps grow very slowly, and most are not cancerous (benign). Some polyps, however, can become cancerous over time.

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Because polyps can be very small, most people won't know if they have them or not. If you have regular screening tests for colorectal cancer, your doctor can find and remove polyps before

they turn into cancer. Even if your doctor finds polyps that are cancerous, he or she can remove them and your chance of being cured is good.

Who should be screened for colorectal cancer, and when?

If you are a healthy adult between 50 and 75 years of age, you should have regular screening tests for colorectal cancer. There are many screening options for you. Your doctor can help you choose between the different tests and decide how often you'd like to be screened.

How can I be tested for colorectal cancer?

There are many different tests that can help find colorectal cancer. The three most common and most effective are a stool test (sometimes called an FOBT or FIT test), a flexible sigmoidoscopy, and a colonoscopy. The stool test is the easiest and most convenient test and is often used as a first line screening for patients who are at lower risk for colorectal cancer. You and your doctor can choose which test is best for you.

The stool test

A stool test is a very quick test with no known side effects. The test is done with a sample of your stool (feces) that you collect yourself. It is most common to do this test at home with a kit you receive in the mail.

What is the test like?

You do not have to prepare for this test or make any special changes to your diet. We will provide all the supplies you need to do this test at home. After you have a bowel movement, you place a small sample of your stool in a tube. Then, you mail the tube to a Kaiser Permanente lab. If lab workers find blood in your stool, your doctor will recommend a follow-up test called a colonoscopy.

The stool test Kaiser Permanente uses are now easier and more accurate than ever. The test is quick and convenient, and by taking the test and returning the envelope, you've taken an important step towards better health.

Flexible sigmoidoscopy

A flexible sigmoidoscopy is a test that is done in your doctor's office. A trained doctor or nurse uses a thin flexible tube to look at the rectum and the lower part of the colon. If your doctor finds any polyps, he or she will recommend a colonoscopy to look at the entire colon and to have the polyps removed.

What is the test like?

This routine procedure is done in a doctor's office while you are fully awake. You will need to take several enemas or an oral laxative two hours before the exam to clear your lower colon and rectum.

While you are resting on your side, a trained doctor or nurse will gently insert a thin, flexible tube into your rectum and slowly move it through the lower part of your colon. Many people describe this as a feeling similar to needing to go to the bathroom.

Most people have some cramping or bloating during the 5 to 10 minutes while the test is being performed. After the exam is over, these sensations usually go away quickly.

After the exam, you should be able to return to your regular activities. You may want to plan for time to rest after the test in case you feel bloated or have gas.

Colonoscopy

A colonoscopy is like a flexible sigmoidoscopy, but it looks at the entire colon. If your doctor finds polyps, they can be removed during the colonoscopy.

What is the test like?

A colonoscopy is an outpatient procedure done in the hospital or in an outpatient clinic. You will be fully sedated so you are comfortable and relaxed during the procedure. You will need to start preparing one to two days before the colonoscopy by drinking a fluid that contains a strong laxative to clear out your colon. Many people stay home the day before because the laxative causes loose, frequent stools.

After the test, you may experience some bloating and discomfort. You will need to arrange for a ride home after the procedure.

This test has more risks, for example bleeding, problems from sedation, and damage to the colon wall. Because of these risks, colonoscopies

are recommended only for patients who are at higher risk for colon cancer, or as a follow up evaluation if you have an abnormal test result from a stool test.

Could I be at high risk for colorectal cancer?

Men and women are at equal risk for colorectal cancer, but people with a personal history or a strong family history of colorectal cancer are at a higher risk than others. If you are at high risk for colorectal cancer, you need special screening. Be sure to talk with your doctor about when and how often to get tested if:

- you have had colorectal cancer;
or
- your sister, brother, parent, or child has had colorectal cancer before the age of 55;
or
- two or more of your sisters, brothers, parents, or children had colorectal cancer at any age.

You should also talk to your health care professional if you are having persistent rectal bleeding, diarrhea, constipation, or stomach pain.

How do I schedule an appointment for colorectal cancer screening?

If you are not having any pain or bleeding from your rectum and do not have a personal or family history of colorectal cancer, you should schedule your first screening test when you are 50 years old.

Your doctor can give you a stool testing kit during an appointment or by mail. When you have completed the test at home, you can mail it back to the lab, free of charge.

For either a flexible sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy, you may need a referral from your doctor. If you are experiencing pain or bleeding from your rectum, tell your doctor or health care professional so that your appointment can be scheduled to meet your special needs.

How can I reduce my risk of colorectal cancer?

In addition to asking your doctor or health care professional about a screening test for colorectal cancer that is right for you, try to:

- Choose foods low in fat and high in soluble fiber. This may help reduce your risk of colorectal cancer by regularly moving waste out of your bowels. To get lots of fiber, eat five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. You can also get fiber from bran cereals, whole grain and whole wheat breads, cooked beans, peas, and popcorn.
- Quit smoking. If you smoke, we can help you quit. Ask your doctor for resources, or contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department.
- Get at least 30 minutes of physical activity (like walking or yard work) on most days of the week. Physical activity can also help improve your overall health.

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- Visit the American Cancer Society at cancer.org.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.