

Don't let colonoscopies scare you

Learn more about colonoscopies for colorectal or colon cancer screening.



Your own vigilance is the best defense against cancer. This entails three things:

- Making lifestyle changes that may prevent cancer
- Monitoring your own body for signs and symptoms of cancer
- Making sure that you are screened regularly by your healthcare provider

We've discussed lifestyle changes in other materials. Here we'll discuss what to look for in the cancers we've been discussing. In particular, we want to talk frankly about colonoscopies for colorectal or colon cancer screening.

Colon cancer symptoms and screening

Blood in the stool is a readily apparent characteristic symptom. Others include weight loss, fatigue, nausea/vomiting, pain in the abdomen, and changes in bowel movements (stool caliber changes, worsening constipation, diarrhea). Often times, colon cancer has no symptoms at all.

Medical guidelines recommend that people at average risk of bowel cancer screen every two years from age 50. If one relative has been diagnosed with bowel cancer at age 55 or older, screening should be considered every two years from age 45.¹ Some people have known genetically based colon cancer syndromes in their family and need even earlier screenings. If this is the case, speak to your healthcare provider on exact recommendations.² There are other less widely used screening tests; speak to your healthcare provider on what procedure is right for you.

Colonoscopies scare a lot of people because they're afraid that the preparation will be awful and that they'll feel pain during the procedure.

The requirements for prep may vary from country to country. You may be asked to restrict your diet for a couple of days before the procedure. The night before the procedure, the usual prep is to take a laxative, either in pill form or liquid form. Once the laxative takes effect, you'll probably spend the entire night in the bathroom. It's certainly not pleasant to have diarrhea all night long. But the reason you need to clean out your colon is so that the doctor doesn't miss any masses across the length of the colon.

During the colonoscopy itself, you should be given light sedation that ensures you won't feel any pain. In fact, most people sleep through the whole procedure.

Here's what you'll miss while you sleep: the doctor inserts a flexible tube with a camera at the end (called a colonoscope) looking up the length of the colon for abnormalities. Colon polyps are growths on the inside of the colon wall. Most are benign (harmless), some are malignant (cancerous). If polyps are found, your doctor may remove them immediately or take tissue samples (biopsies) for analysis. If malignant, there could be additional steps taken towards treating.³

If you do have polyps, the doctor may want to increase the frequency of your colonoscopies to see if you are prone to developing them. This is something you'll need to discuss with your healthcare provider once you get the results of the procedure.

Remember that colon cancer has a 90 percent survival rate when detected at the early stages. Try to remind yourself of that while you're hesitating to make your appointment for a colonoscopy. Or debating whether to cancel the appointment you have because you're too nervous, scared or uncomfortable. It's true: the test is not entirely pleasant (mostly the preparation is the part that people hate).

But long after you've forgotten the discomfort, you'll remember that you took charge of your own life and defended yourself against a very nasty and potentially deadly form of cancer.



1. Bowel Cancer Australia, bowelcanceraustralia.org/screening, "Bowel Cancer Screening", 2017.
2. <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/colon-and-rectal-cancer-screening-beyond-the-basics>
3. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/colon-polyps/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20352881>

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