

# screening for colorectal cancer



The first wealth  
is health.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

### **Why is colorectal cancer screening important?**

Colorectal cancer is preventable and can be cured if it is found early. Most colorectal cancers come from colon polyps (growths in the colon, or large intestine). The risk of colorectal cancer can be reduced by having regular screenings.

### **How do I know if I have an increased risk for getting colorectal cancer?**

Your risk for getting colorectal cancer increases if:

- You have at least one close family member (mother, father, sister, brother, son, or daughter) who has had colorectal cancer before age 60.
- You have two or more close relatives who have had colorectal cancer at any age.

If you are at **high risk** of getting colorectal cancer, the recommended screening test is a colonoscopy. If you have had colorectal cancer, your health care professional may recommend more frequent screenings than shown in the table on page 4.

You are at **average risk** if you have no family history of colorectal cancer or have had only one close family member (mother, father, sister, brother, son, or daughter) with colorectal cancer at age **60 or older**. The recommended screening tests for people at average risk are listed on the next page and in the table on page 4.

### **How do I know which screening test is best for me?**

Any of the following tests are recommended for colorectal cancer screening **beginning at age 50** if you are an **average-risk** adult with no symptoms:

- A fecal occult blood test (FOBT) every year.
- Flexible sigmoidoscopy at least every 10 years.
- Both the FOBT every year and flexible sigmoidoscopy at least every 10 years.

You may have heard of other colorectal screening tests, such as CT colonography or virtual colonoscopy. These screening tests are new and do not have enough scientific evidence to determine whether or not they are effective ways to screen for colorectal cancer. Experts within Kaiser Permanente will continue to review scientific studies on all new screening tests to evaluate their effectiveness.


### **Why should I have both an FOBT and flexible sigmoidoscopy?**

The two tests look for different warning signs. The FOBT test finds trace amounts of blood not seen with the naked eye that could be a sign of early cancer or polyps in your colon. A flexible sigmoidoscopy can find polyps in the lower colon.

### **What are some of the risks of being tested?**

There is a slight risk of a complication during and after flexible sigmoidoscopy. There is a greater risk of complication during or after a colonoscopy. Complications might include bleeding (especially after a biopsy or removal of a polyp)





It is health that  
is real wealth  
and not pieces  
of gold and  
silver.

Mahatma Gandhi

and perforations of the colon. The sedative given for the colonoscopy may cause side effects.

Getting regular screenings for colorectal cancer is the best way to find any polyps or cancers. However, not all polyps or cancers may be found. Talk with your health care professional about any questions you have about the risks of each screening test.

### **What if I have a polyp or cancer?**

Polyps are growths that can be from the size of a pea to the size of a golf ball. They are often found during a colonoscopy. A small percentage of polyps can become cancer, so taking out certain types of polyps may prevent you from getting cancer at a later time. These polyps are removed during either a sigmoidoscopy or a colonoscopy, so surgery is not needed. If cancer is found, a treatment plan will be made with the help of your physician. Colon surgery is usually recommended as part of the treatment plan.

### **How should I prepare for my colorectal screening test?**

Your health care professional will give you instructions on how to prepare for a screening test. You can take most medications as usual, but some medications can interfere with the

preparation or the screening test. Tell your health care professional about the medications you are taking, especially aspirin products, arthritis medications, anticoagulants (blood thinners), insulin, or iron products. Also, be sure to mention allergies you have to any medications.

Stool test kits sent to you by mail include detailed instructions on how to prepare for the test and how to collect and return stool samples.

### **What else can I do to reduce my risk of colorectal cancer?**

In addition to getting regular colorectal screenings, tell your health care professional if you notice blood in your stool, have pain in your abdomen, or if there are changes in your bowel habits on a regular basis.

Other things you can do to improve your general health include:

- Choose foods low in fat and high in soluble fiber (apples, oats, peas, beans, etc.). Eat five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. Other sources of fiber can be found in bran cereals, whole grains, and whole-wheat breads.
- Quit smoking. If you smoke and would like to quit, we can help you. Call the Kaiser Permanente Smoker's Helpline at 1-888-883-STOP (7867), or contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Department.
- Get lots of physical activity (like walking or yard work).

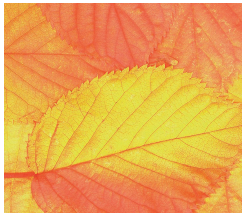


If you are at average risk

If you are at increased risk

Screening Option	How It's Done	Preparation Time Needed	Things to Consider
Stool Test for Blood: Fecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT)	Collect a stool sample at home to send to the lab. The sample is tested for traces of blood.	None. It takes a few minutes to collect the sample.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be done at home.</li> <li>• You will get a stool test kit with instructions about medications and how to collect a stool sample.</li> </ul>
Flexible Sigmoidoscopy	A flexible tube is used to look at the inside of the rectum and lower part of the colon to check for polyps or colon cancer.	The bowel must be cleaned out with an enema or a strong laxative before the test. The test takes about 15 to 30 minutes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The test is usually given without sedation.</li> <li>• You may feel some discomfort but it is usually not painful.</li> <li>• You can leave on your own and drive home or return to your normal activities right away.</li> <li>• Looks at only the lower part of the colon, called the rectum.</li> </ul>
Stool Test for Blood and Sigmoidoscopy	A stool test for blood every year combined with a sigmoidoscopy at least every 10 years.	See above for preparation and time required.	Together, these two tests may be more effective than either test alone.
Colonoscopy	A flexible tube is used to look at the inside of the entire colon.	The bowel must be cleaned out with a strong laxative before the test. The test takes 30 to 60 minutes. Afterward, you will need time in the recovery area and at home to recover from the sedation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The test is usually given with sedation.</li> <li>• You may feel some discomfort but it is usually not painful.</li> <li>• You'll need someone to drive you home, and you won't be able to return to work that day.</li> <li>• If any polyps or abnormal growths are found, they can be removed for more testing.</li> </ul>





The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have further questions, please consult with your health care professional.



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