

Lifelines

from the National Cancer Institute



Colorectal Cancer Awareness: What You Should Know about Screening

By the National Cancer Institute

It may be one of your parents. It may be a co-worker, or someone from your church. It could be a neighbor, a girlfriend from your book club, or the favorite uncle or aunt who always organizes the summer family reunion. It could even be you who will face colorectal cancer one day. It can be unsettling to think about it, but know that you can turn to the National Cancer Institute for information if you are faced with this situation.

Also, there is something you can do to help prevent colorectal cancer in your life and in the lives of those you associate with and love: get regularly screened for colorectal cancer. Read on to learn more information about colorectal cancer and colorectal cancer screening so you will be fully informed.

Although deaths from colorectal cancer have declined in recent decades, colorectal cancer remains the third most frequently diagnosed cancer in both men and women, and the second leading cause of cancer deaths, in the United States. And rates of colorectal cancer diagnosis and death are higher for African Americans than for all other racial and ethnic groups in the United States.

Because colorectal cancer can take many years to develop, early detection and treatment of the disease greatly improve the chances of a cure. Screening also enables doctors to detect and remove abnormal colorectal growths, or polyps, before they even become cancer. According to most current guidelines, people at average risk for this disease should be screened regularly starting at age 50. If any family members have had colorectal cancer, you should talk to your doctor about when and how often you should be screened, because you are at a higher risk.

Unfortunately, almost half of people aged 50 to 75 are not being screened regularly for colorectal cancer. And despite some gains, African Americans are still less likely to be screened than whites. If cost is keeping you from making that appointment, remember that most insurance plans help pay for colorectal cancer screening tests for people aged 50 or older. Many plans also help pay for screening tests for people younger than 50 who are at increased

risk for colorectal cancer. Check with your health insurance plan to determine your colorectal cancer screening benefits. If you do not have insurance, call 1-800-4-CANCER to learn about free or low-cost screening options in your community. Your local health department may also have information. Under the health insurance reforms signed into law earlier this year all new private plans will provide basic preventive services such as colon cancer screening at no cost.

If fear or a lack of understanding is keeping you from making that colorectal screening appointment, start by learning more about the different screening options available to you. On www.cancer.gov (search term: Colorectal Screening), you can read about screening options and compare the advantages and disadvantages of each. Typical screening options are colonoscopy every 10 years, yearly fecal occult blood testing (FOBT), and flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years along with FOBT every two to three years, but new and potentially more comfortable screening techniques are being developed. You can also ask your doctor the following questions about screening:

- Which screening tests do you recommend for me and why?
- How much do the tests cost?
- Will my health insurance plan help pay for screening tests?
- Are the tests painful?
- How soon after the tests will I learn the results?

For more information about colorectal cancer, contact the National Cancer Institute's (NCI's) Cancer Information Service (CIS) toll-free at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237) Monday - Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., Eastern Time. Trained information specialists are available to answer your questions in English or Spanish. You can also contact NCI's CIS on the internet, via LiveHelp Online Chat (Monday – Friday 8:00 a.m. – 11:00 p.m. EST) or via email at www.cancer.gov/contact. Learn about all you can do to lower your risk of colorectal cancer and take control of your health.

NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI Web site at www.cancer.gov or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237).