

Lifelines



from the National Cancer Institute

Colorectal Cancer is Preventable: Information for African Americans

By the National Cancer Institute

Many people who fear cancer don't realize that some types of cancer are [preventable](#). Cancer of the colon or rectum (together referred to as [colorectal](#) cancer) is one of these. What's more, colorectal cancer can often be treated effectively if it is found early enough.

Regrettably, African Americans (both men and women) are more likely than people of any other racial/ethnic group in the United States to develop colorectal cancer, and also to die from it. Nearly 17,000 African Americans will develop colorectal cancer this year. Only prostate, breast, and lung cancer kill more African Americans.

Doctors don't know exactly why African Americans are harder hit with this disease, but they do know that [many cases and deaths could be avoided](#) if African Americans knew about—and followed—recommended strategies for prevention and early detection. Here are some things to keep in mind about colorectal cancer:

Colorectal Cancer and Precancers Can Be Detected Early

Most colorectal cancers develop from a certain type of [polyp](#), called an adenoma. Polyps begin as small growths on the inner lining of the rectum or the colon. A number of [different tests](#) can be used to check if people have polyps or colorectal cancer. Polyps can often be detected by a colonoscopy, a sigmoidoscopy, or a [fecal occult blood test](#), and then removed before they have a chance to develop into cancer. Some of the tests are done at your doctor's office, and others are done at home using a kit that your doctor gives you.

Some polyps can grow and develop into cancer without any real symptoms. So, unless you are checked regularly for polyps, you could develop colorectal cancer that will be harder to treat by the time symptoms appear.

There are two ways to reduce your risk of colorectal cancer. One is to be sure that you undergo regular [screening](#)—and follow-up with effective diagnosis and treatment when screening finds a possible problem, such as large polyps or a cancer. The other is to know—and try to reduce—the risk factors for colorectal cancer that you have the power to change.

Talk To Your Doctor about Regular Screening

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Colorectal cancer is more likely to occur as people get older. Many experts recommend that both men and women start getting screened beginning at age 50.

People should talk with their doctor about when to begin screening for colorectal cancer, what tests to have, the benefits and harms of each test, and how often to get screened. Common considerations include your age, your family's history of colorectal cancer, the convenience of the test and the preparation required for it, your insurance coverage, and other factors.

Although some people may feel embarrassed about the idea of colorectal cancer screening and are worried about some of the procedures that are used, colorectal cancer screening decreases the risk of dying from colon cancer. So, it's important to push past any reluctance and talk with your doctor to learn more.

Think about Changing Your Lifestyle—Even Just a Little

A number of studies show a link between certain “lifestyle factors” and people's chances of getting colorectal cancer—and other cancers as well. [People who drink](#) three or more alcoholic beverages per day are at increased risk of colorectal cancer, as are people who are obese. Those who engage in regular physical activity have a lower risk. [Daily aspirin also decreases risk](#), but it may cause intestinal bleeding and other side effects, and it's important to find out from your doctor whether it is right for you.

Take time to learn as much as you can and share the information with people you love. The National Cancer Institute is a great resource for this information. [See video.](#)

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 m.cancer.gov from your mobile device) or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). More articles and [videos](#) in the culturally relevant Lifelines series are available at www.cancer.gov/lifelines.