

Colorectal cancer screening: What to expect

Screening for colorectal cancer is crucial for identifying malignant (cancerous) and benign (noncancerous) growths—which could still turn cancerous—as early as possible. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends adults ages 45 to 75 of average risk get screened for colorectal cancer. Patients should consult their doctors about the most appropriate screening method based on their age, medical and family histories, current overall health, cost and follow-up care, and other factors. The most common screening methods for colorectal cancer are:

Stool tests. The patient uses a kit to take a stool sample at home. They return the kit to the doctor to test for tiny amounts of blood that may not be seen with the naked eye. If the findings are positive, the doctor will usually recommend a colonoscopy.

 Sometimes  Every 1 to 3 years





Colonoscopy. The doctor inserts a [colonoscope](#)—a flexible tube with a light and lens for viewing the colon and a tool for removing tissue—through the anus into the rectum and colon, and air is pumped into the colon to expand it so that the doctor can see the entire colon lining more clearly. The doctor can remove abnormal growths during this procedure, which are analyzed for cancer.

     Every 10 years


Virtual Colonoscopy. X-ray images are digitally assembled to create 3D images of the colon and rectum. If the doctor finds abnormal growths, the patient needs a standard colonoscopy to remove them.


  Every 5 years


Sigmoidoscopy. The doctor inserts a [sigmoidoscope](#)—like a colonoscope but shorter—through the anus into the rectum and sigmoid colon (which holds feces until you go to the bathroom) and pumps air into the colon to expand it. The doctor can remove and analyze abnormal growths.


    Every 5 or 10 years if combined with a fecal immunochemical test

KEY

 Change diet/medication before procedure

 Invasive (a device is inserted into the body)

 Colon cleansing (cleared of stool) needed before procedure

 Sedated during procedure

 Frequency