

PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

Colorectal Cancer Screening Recommendations

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WHAT IS COLORECTAL CANCER?

Colorectal cancer is a form of cancer that affects the colon and/or rectum. Early detection of this cancer can be challenging as it does not typically present with apparent symptoms during the initial stages.¹ Fortunately, screening tests for colorectal cancer can identify cancer in its early stages and lead to better treatment outcomes. In advanced stages of colorectal cancer, noticeable symptoms can include:

- Changes in the shape, color, or consistency of stool or changes in bowel habits that last longer than a few days
- Bleeding when wiping or blood in the stool
- Discomfort or cramping in the abdomen
- Unintentional weight loss
- Weakness or fatigue
- Persistent urges to have a bowel movement, even after using the restroom

HOW CAN TALKING ABOUT YOUR BOWEL MOVEMENTS SAVE YOUR LIFE?

Colorectal cancer is the third most common cause of cancer-related deaths.² Unfortunately, it can feel uncomfortable discussing your bowel movements with your physician, resulting in delayed diagnosis and treatment of colorectal cancer. Delays in treatment can lead to the advancement of cancer, decreased effectiveness of treatments, and lower chances of survival.

WHEN SHOULD I START MY SCREENING?

Due to an increased rate of colorectal cancer in younger adults,³ new screening guidelines recommend beginning at age 45 years and continuing until age 75 years.¹ How often you get screened depends on many factors you can discuss with your physician. Talk with your physician about whether you have certain risk factors that may require you to begin screening earlier.⁴ These include⁴:

- Previous diagnosis of colon polyps or colorectal cancer
- History of inflammatory bowel diseases (ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease)
- Previous exposure to radiation of the abdomen or pelvic area
- Family history of colorectal cancer
- African American or American Indian ancestry²

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HOW DOES SCREENING WORK?

Your first step should be to talk with your physician. Do not feel embarrassed or hesitant to discuss your bowel movements; this information is critical to understanding your health. There are several different methods of colorectal cancer screening, and each method has its own set of risks and benefits. Your physician will help determine which screening method is right for you. The current leading screening methods are as follows^{3,4}:

- Colonoscopy/sigmoidoscopy: This procedure uses a camera to assess the inside of the colon for abnormalities while the patient is sedated
- Computed tomography (CT) colonography: A noninvasive procedure that uses CT imaging to view the colon from the outside
- Stool tests: A laboratory test that analyzes the stool for signs of cancer

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