

# Colon Cancer Risk Factors & Symptoms



## What is the colon?

The colon and rectum make up the large intestine, which is part of the digestive system or gastrointestinal (GI) tract. Together, the colon and rectum are a muscular tube about five feet long. The colon absorbs water from food as it passes through the GI tract. The final 6 inches of the colon, or rectum, is where waste is stored until it passes out of your body as stool or poop.

## Risk factors for colon cancer

There are many risk factors for colorectal cancer. Risk factors you can change include:

- Being overweight.
- Being physically inactive.
- Smoking.
- Eating a diet high in red meats (like beef and pork) and processed meats (like hot dogs and bologna), or eating a lot of fried, broiled or grilled meats.
- Heavy use of alcohol. For women, this is more than 1 drink a day and for men, it's 2 drinks a day or more.

There are also other risk factors for colon cancer that you cannot change. These include:

- Advancing age. You can get colon cancer at any age, but it's more common after you turn 50.
- Inflammatory bowel syndrome, whether it is Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis.
- A personal or family history of colorectal cancer or polyps.
- Race and ethnicity. African Americans have one of the highest rates of colorectal cancer in the United States, and Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern European descent have one of the highest risks of any ethnic group worldwide.
- Type 2 diabetes, whether or not you require insulin.

## Symptoms of colon cancer

Colorectal cancer might not cause symptoms right away. But if you have any of the following symptoms for more than a few days, call your provider. They could be signs of colon cancer:

- A change in bowel habits, such as diarrhea, constipation or pencil-thin stool.
- A feeling that you need to have a bowel movement, but having a bowel movement doesn't bring any relief.
- Rectal bleeding with bright red blood that is not due to hemorrhoids.
- Blood in your stool, which may make the stool look dark, almost black and tarry.
- Cramping or stomach pain.
- Unintended weight loss.

## Detecting colon cancer

There are several different tests that can detect colon cancer. Your healthcare provider will decide which tests you need based on your physical examination and history.

- A digital exam. Your provider will insert their finger into your rectum to feel for growths or abnormal tissue.
- Fecal occult blood testing, also known as a Hemoccult or Guaiac test. In this test, a small amount of stool is smeared on a special card. Then certain chemicals are applied to look for hidden blood.
- Blood tests. These include tumor marker tests or other, more routine tests to determine if you have other symptoms, like anemia, potentially caused by colorectal cancer.
- Colonoscopy. While you are sedated, the provider threads a long thin tube with a camera on the end through your anus, rectum and colon. The provider will look for abnormal tissue and may even take some biopsies, which are bits of tissue that can be looked at under a microscope for signs of cancer.

Talk with your provider about what screening tests you need based on your age and risk factors. Remember, with early detection you can have early treatment, which can greatly improve the odds of living a long and healthy life.

This and more information can be found at the American Cancer Society at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)