



Why Should I Be Tested for Colorectal Cancer?

Cancer of the colon and the rectum (colorectal) is the third leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States. It is also one of the most preventable cancers. Screening can help find early signs of cancer in the colon and rectum.

How can I be tested for colorectal cancer?

The two most widely available and effective tests for colorectal cancer are the fecal occult blood test (FOBT, sometimes referred to as FIT) and flexible sigmoidoscopy.

A FOBT is done with a stool sample that you collect at home, using a kit you may receive from your doctor or by mail. The kit may mention FIT; this is the same type of test.

A flexible sigmoidoscopy examines the rectum and lower part of the colon using a thin flexible tube about as thick as a finger. A trained doctor or nurse uses this tube to look for polyps (non-cancerous growths) and small cancerous tumors.

What is the FOBT test like?

The fecal occult blood test (FOBT or FIT Fecal Immunochemical Test) starts at home, when you place a small sample of stool in a tube. You mail the tube to a Kaiser Permanente lab. If lab workers find blood in the sample, your doctor will recommend a total colon evaluation (colonoscopy or barium enema). The FOBT is a very quick test with no known side effects.

What is the flexible sigmoidoscopy test like?

This is a routine procedure performed in a doctor's office while you are fully awake. You will need to take several enemas or an oral laxative two hours before the exam to clear your lower colon and rectum.

While you are resting on your side, a trained doctor or nurse will gently insert a thin, flexible tube into your rectum and gradually move it through the lower part of your colon. Many people describe this as a feeling similar to needing to go to the bathroom.

Most people also have some cramping or bloating during the 5 to 10 minutes while the test is being performed. After the exam is over, these sensations usually go away quickly.

After the exam, you should be able to return to your regular activities. You may want to plan for time to rest after the test in case you feel bloated or have gas.

What about colonoscopy for colorectal cancer screening?

A colonoscopy is like a flexible sigmoidoscopy, but it looks at the entire colon. Unlike a flexible sigmoidoscopy, you are sedated for a colonoscopy. This test has more risks, for example bleeding, problems from sedation, and damage to the colon wall. Because of these risks, it is recommended only for high-risk patients.

Who should be screened for colorectal cancer, and when?

All healthy adults 50 years of age and older should schedule their first colorectal cancer screening test. FOBT screening should be done every year. Flexible sigmoidoscopy should be done every 5 years. Colonoscopy should be performed once every 10 years, unless advised by your doctor. The FOBT can also be used in combination with flexible sigmoidoscopy to screen for colorectal cancer between procedures.

If you are at high risk for colorectal cancer, you need special screening. Ask your doctor how often you should be tested. People with a personal or a strong family history of colorectal cancer are at a higher risk than others. Men and women are at equal risk for colorectal cancer. Be sure to talk with your doctor about when and how often to get tested if:

- you have ever had colorectal cancer;
or
- your sister, brother, parent, or child has had colorectal cancer before the age of 55;
or
- two or more of your sisters, brothers, parents, or children have ever had colorectal cancer at any age.

You should also talk to your health care professional if you are having persistent rectal bleeding, diarrhea, constipation, or stomach pain.



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How do I schedule an appointment for colorectal cancer screening?

If you are not having any pain or bleeding from your rectum and do not have a personal or family history of colorectal cancer, you should schedule your first FOBT/FIT or flexible sigmoidoscopy when you are 50 years old.

Your doctor can give you the testing kit for FOBT at an appointment or by mail. When you have completed the test at home, mail it back to the lab, free of charge.

For either a flexible sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy, you will need a referral from your doctor. When you schedule your appointment, you may find that your appointment is for a date further in the future than usual. This is because the flexible sigmoidoscopy is a routine screening test for all of our Kaiser Permanente members 50 years old and older. If you are experiencing pain or bleeding from your rectum, tell your doctor or health care professional so that your appointment can be scheduled to meet your special needs.

How do I prepare for colorectal cancer screening?

There is little preparation for the FOBT/FIT test. No diet changes are needed and there are no known side effects. You can return to work immediately.

Preparing for a flexible sigmoidoscopy requires clearing your rectum and lower colon of stool so that the test will be accurate and complete. This involves taking enemas or an oral laxative and possibly changing your diet just before the test. When you schedule your appointment, you will receive more specific instructions.

Preparing for a colonoscopy involves taking a stronger enema or laxative so the entire colon will be clear for the exam. You will be sedated so that you are more comfortable and relaxed during the procedure. You may experience some bloating and discomfort. You will need to arrange for a ride home after the procedure.

What can I do to reduce my risk of colorectal cancer?

In addition to asking your doctor or health care professional about a screening test for colorectal cancer that is right for you, try to:

- **Choose foods low in fat and high in soluble fiber.** This may help reduce your risk of colorectal cancer by regularly moving waste out of your bowels. To get lots of fiber, eat five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. You can also get fiber from bran cereals, whole grain and whole wheat breads, cooked beans, peas, and popcorn.
- **Quit smoking.** If you smoke, we can help you quit. Ask your doctor for resources, or contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department.
- **Get 60 minutes of physical activity** (like walking or yard work) on most days of the week. Physical activity can also help improve your overall health.

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- American Cancer Society at cancer.org.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.

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915800052 (Revised 5-08) RL 8.4