

A Guide to Colon Cancer Screening

Why should I get screened?



...because they all depend on me.



...because my girls only have one mom.



...because we practice what we preach.



...because I'm **not** "too old" for adventure.



...because "Grandpa" never sounded better.



...because it can save my life.

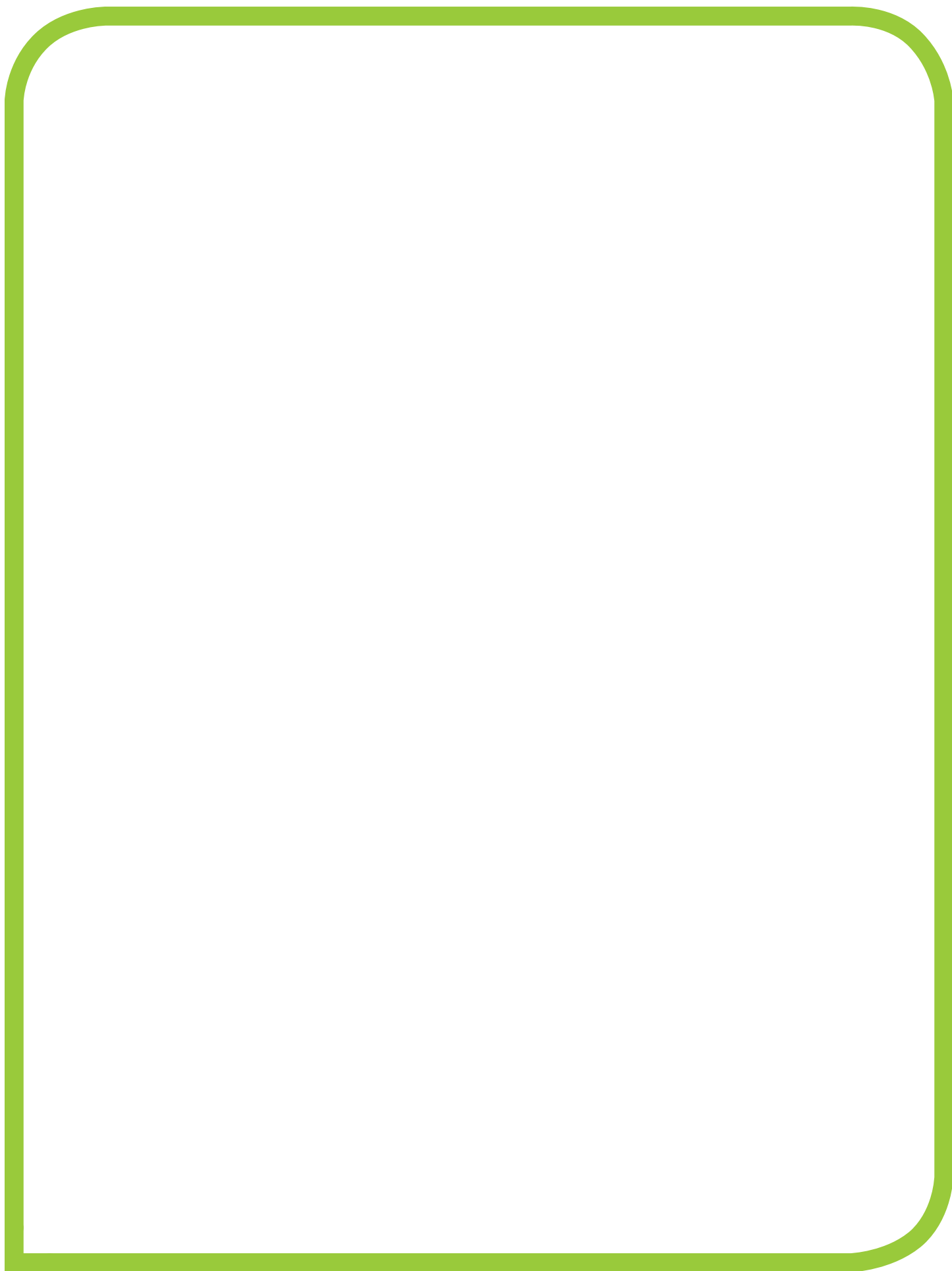


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This guide tells about the ways to get screened (tested) for colon cancer.

What is the purpose of this guide?

- This guide tells you about colon cancer, how it grows and why it is so important to get screened.
- It explains two different ways to get screened for colon cancer. One test is called “colonoscopy” and the other is called a “stool test.”
- The guide will help you make choices about getting screened and help you know what will happen when you are screened.
- As our understanding of cancer improves, these guidelines can change. Always check with your provider about what screening is best for you.

Who needs to be screened?

- People who get colon cancer are usually 45 years of age or older. If you are 45 or older, you should get screened for colon cancer. If you are older than 75, talk to your doctor about screening.
- People who have a personal or family history of colon cancer, or certain other diseases, may need to be screened when they are younger than 45.

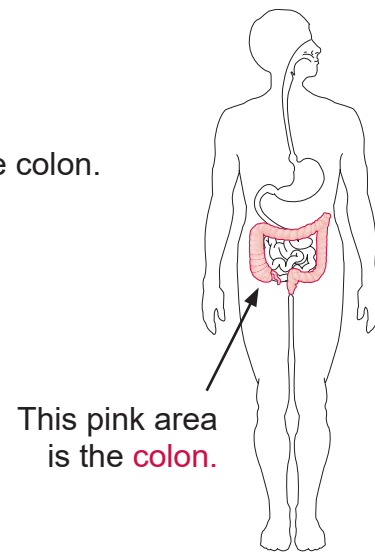
Why get screened?

- Screening tests can help your doctor find and remove polyps before they turn into cancer. Polyps are growths that can turn into cancer if they are not removed.
- When colon cancer is caught early, it can be cured 90% of the time.
- Early on, colon cancer has no symptoms so you could have colon cancer and not know it. The only way to know for sure is to get screened.

What is colon cancer?

“Colon cancer” is the name for cancer that grows in the colon. Your colon is also called the “large intestine.”

- Your colon is a long, soft tube inside your body where your stools are made out of some things in food your body can't use. Another name for stool is Bowel Movement or BM.



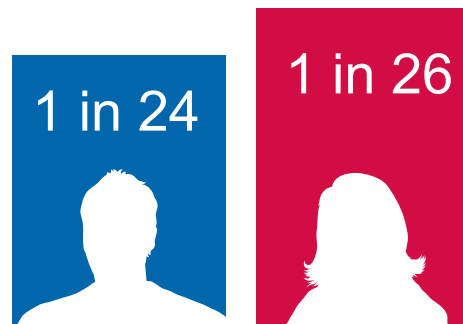
This pink area is the **colon**.

Who gets colon cancer?

- People are usually 45 or older when they get colon cancer. The older you get, the more likely you are to get colon cancer.
- However, colon cancer is also rising in young adults.
- Most people who get colon cancer do not have a parent or sibling with colon cancer. But having a parent or sibling who has colon cancer does make you more likely to get colon cancer.

How common is colon cancer?

- Colon cancer is the third most diagnosed cancer among men and the fourth most diagnosed cancer among women in Massachusetts.^[1]
- One in 24 men and one in 26 women will get colon cancer.^[2]



[1] MA Cancer Registry Cancer Incidence and Mortality 2016-2020 Statewide report

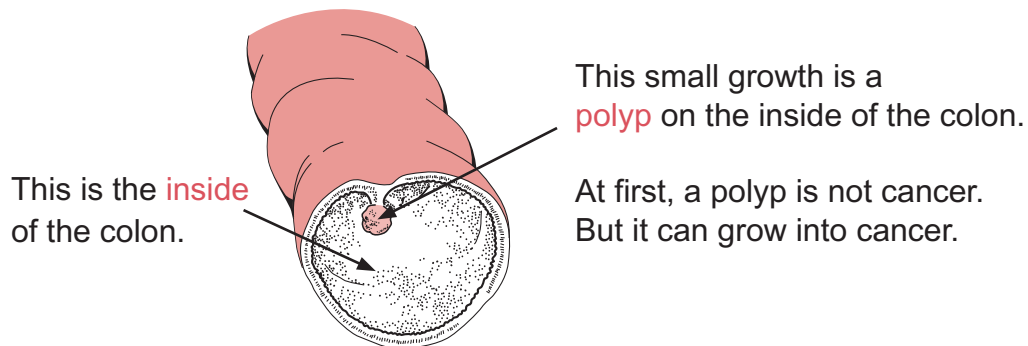
[2] American Cancer Society (2025). Key Statistics for Colorectal Cancer.

<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/colon-rectal-cancer/about/key-statistics.html>

How does colon cancer grow?

Polyps in the colon are the starting point for colon cancer.

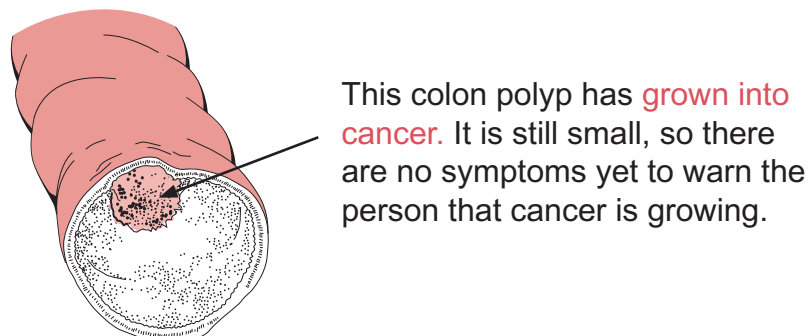
Polyps (pronounced “pol-lips”) grow on the inside of the colon. The drawing below shows that polyps are small growths usually smaller than the size of a pencil eraser.



- Anyone can get a polyp.
- Polyps don't cause symptoms, so most people with a polyp don't know they have them.

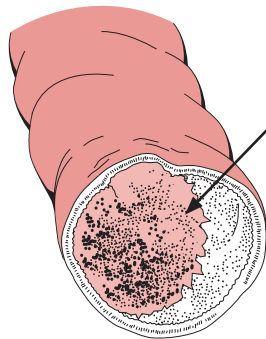
Sometimes a polyp grows into cancer.

- Polyps grow very slowly, so it can take up to 10 years for a polyp to turn into cancer. Cancer that grows slowly often does not cause symptoms for a long time.
- The drawing below shows a polyp that has grown and turned into cancer.



How does colon cancer grow, *continued...*

When a cancer gets large, it can block the colon and cause symptoms.



This colon cancer has been growing for a long time (many years). **This cancer is large enough to start blocking the colon** and cause some symptoms that are warning signs.

These are some symptoms caused by cancer that has been growing for a long time:

- Blood in stool (bowel movement) or in the toilet bowl
- Changes in your bowel movements for no reason. For example having diarrhea, constipation or thinner stool that lasts several days.
- Persistent abdominal (belly) pain
- Losing weight without trying

If you have any of these symptoms be sure to tell your doctor. Having these warning signs might mean colon cancer or might mean something else.

It is important to get screened to find colon polyps and cancer when you don't have any symptoms. Polyps and cancer that has not been growing for a long time can be removed so they don't continue to grow.

The rest of this guide is about 2 common tests to screen for colon cancer:

1. Colonoscopy (kole-on-OSS-ko-pee)

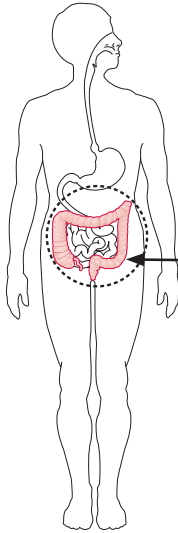
- One type of screening test — a colonoscopy — can prevent colon cancer by finding and removing polyps before they become cancer.
- A doctor uses a thin, soft tube with a tiny camera to look for polyps anywhere in the whole colon.
- The doctor can remove any polyps they find during the colonoscopy.

2. Stool Test

- There are different stool tests such as Fecal Immunochemical Test (FIT), Stool DNA test and guaiac-based Fecal Occult Blood Test (gFOBT). Discuss with your provider what stool test works best for you.
- This test is done at home. The test uses a sample of your stool (bowel movement) to determine if there is hidden blood in it. If your test shows hidden blood you will need to get a colonoscopy to find out if colon cancer or a polyp is there.
- You will follow the instructions in the kit. You will send the samples back to your doctor's office or a lab so they can be tested for hidden blood.

Getting a Colonoscopy

A doctor uses a thin, soft tube with a tiny camera to look for polyps anywhere in the whole colon.



When you get a colonoscopy, **the doctor looks at the inside of the whole colon**, from the beginning to the end.

Getting ready for the test

- The day before the test you cannot eat any solid food. You can only drink water and clear liquids. Clear liquids include apple juice, Jell-O (except red) and clear broth.



This person is drinking a **clear liquid** to get ready for a colonoscopy. Any liquid you can see through is a clear liquid. You are not allowed to eat or drink anything else, **just clear liquids**.

- The day before the test, you take a laxative to clean all of the stool out of the colon. You will have watery stools (diarrhea). When you get a colonoscopy, **the doctor looks at the inside of the whole colon** from the beginning to the end. It is very important that your colon does not have any stool in it at the time of the test.
- It is important to follow your doctor's instructions on how to prepare for your colonoscopy.

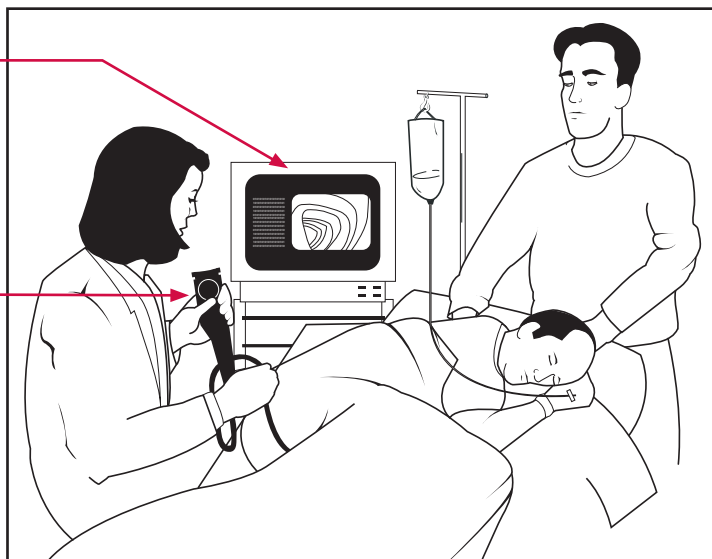
Getting a Colonoscopy

Getting the test

- On the day of the test you go to the hospital or a clinic, and you lie down on your side on a bed.
 - You will be given a medicine that will make you drowsy, help you relax and make you more comfortable.
 - You are usually so sleepy you do not see or feel much of what happens.
- After the test you go into another room and rest in a bed until you fully wake up and are ready to leave.
- You will not be able to drive home after the test. You will need support to get home.

A tiny camera shows the inside of the colon on a TV screen.

The doctor puts the scope into the rectum and slowly pushes it inside the colon, all the way to the end. The doctor can remove any polyps they find.



Answers to questions about colonoscopy

How long does the test take?

- The test itself takes about 20 minutes, but you will be at the hospital or clinic for 2 – 3 hours all together.
- After the test you have to stay at home for the rest of the day to let the medicine that makes you drowsy wears off.

How much discomfort does the test cause?

- You should not feel much discomfort because you get medicine to make you sleepy and ease any discomfort you might have.

How good is the test?

- When colon cancer is caught early, it can be cured 90% of the time.

Is any follow-up testing needed?

- If everything is normal, no.
- If your colonoscopy results are abnormal or show signs of cancer, it is very important to follow up with your doctor as soon as possible. Your doctor may recommend additional testing and care.

How often does the test need to be repeated?

- If you have the test and no polyps are found, you should have the test again in about 10 years. Polyps grow very slowly and a polyp takes about 10 years to get big enough to worry about.

Stool Test

Getting ready for the test

- The stool test looks for hidden blood in a bowel movement.
- There are different stool tests such as Fecal Immunochemical Test (FIT), Stool DNA test and guaiac-based Fecal Occult Blood Test (gFOBT).
- Discuss with your doctor about what stool test is best for you.
- Follow the instructions that come with the kit and return the kit to your doctor or assigned lab based on the suggested time frame.
- Depending on the type of test you complete, your doctor may ask you to stop eating certain foods or taking certain medicines a few days before you do the test. These can cause the test to be inaccurate.

Doing the test

- Depending on the type of test kit that your doctor gives you, you will need to put a sample from your stool (bowel movement) on a card using a stick, or a brush, or into a small tube. You will need to do this for 1, 2, or 3 bowel movements, depending on the test the doctor gives you.
- When you have collected all of the samples you need, you will put them in the envelope that comes with the kit and mail them back to the doctor's office, or lab, depending on the instructions.
- Your doctor or a lab will test your samples with a chemical that shows if any hidden blood was in the samples. If your test shows hidden blood, you will need to get a colonoscopy to find out if colon cancer or a polyp is present in your colon.

Answers to questions about the Stool Test

How long does the test take?

- The test itself takes just a few minutes a day.

How much discomfort does the test cause?

- There is no discomfort caused by this test, but if you're concerned about your ability to comfortably complete a stool test, talk to your provider.

How good is the test?

- Experts recommend the stool test as a good way to find colon cancer early, when treatment works best.

Is any follow-up testing needed?

- If the stool test is positive for blood you need to get a colonoscopy to find out if colon cancer or a polyp is there.

How often does the test need to be repeated?

- There are several types of stool tests. How often you repeat them will depend on the test you are given by your doctor.

Things you can do to help prevent colon cancer:

We don't know exactly what causes colon cancer, but we know some things that raise your chances of getting colon cancer, like being overweight, eating a lot of red meat, and smoking. Getting screened is the most important thing you can do to prevent colon cancer.

Healthy habits make it less likely that you will get colon cancer. Doing these things lowers your chances of getting colon cancer:

- Eating healthy foods (lots of fruits and vegetables)
- Keeping a healthy weight
- Being physically active. Choose activities that make your heart beat faster and your lungs breathe harder. Include activities which make your muscles do more work than usual.
- Not using tobacco
- Limiting alcohol use

If you are 45 or older, talk to your doctor about getting screened for colon cancer.

NOTES:

Save this Guide to Colon Cancer Screening...

it could save your life.

Why should I get screened?



...because I have a list of places to go.



...because I have a lot of cooking to do.

Save this Guide to Colon Cancer Screening...

it could save your life.



For further information:

www.mass.gov/cancerscreenings

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