

Understanding Your Colorectal Cancer Risk

About 1 in 23 men and 1 in 25 women are at risk for getting colorectal cancer in their lifetime. There are factors that can increase your chance of getting a disease such as colorectal cancer. Some of these can be changed, like what you eat. Some of these can't be changed, like having a family history. Knowing your risk helps you to take control of your health and the steps you can take to lower risk.

What Increases Your Risk for Colorectal Cancer?

Risk Factors that You Can't Control

Age—the risk is higher in people over 50.

History of polyps or colorectal cancer—a history of certain types of polyps in the colon or rectum (adenomas) or previous colorectal cancer increases your risk.

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)—having IBD, including ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease, increases your risk.

Family history—about 1/3 of people who have colorectal cancer have family members who have had it or polyps that can become cancer. If a parent, sibling, or child has had colorectal cancer or polyps, your risk is higher.

Inherited syndromes—about 5% of colorectal cancers are caused by genetic conditions such as: Lynch syndrome, familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP), MYH-associated polyposis, and Peutz-Jeghers syndrome.

Racial and ethnic background—African Americans and Jews of Eastern European descent (Ashkenazi) are at higher risk for colorectal cancer than other racial or ethnic groups.

Type 2 Diabetes—people with Type 2 diabetes may be at a higher risk.

Risk Factors that You Can Control

Your risk of developing colorectal cancer is higher if:



You are overweight or have obesity.



You are not physically active.



You eat a diet high in red meats such as beef, pork, lamb, or liver and processed meats such as lunch meats.



You are a smoker.



You drink more than 2 drinks/day for men and 1 drink/day for women.



What You Can Do to Decrease Your Risk for Colorectal Cancer



Get Screened! All adults should be screened at age 45 or earlier if you are at higher risk for colorectal cancer. There are several tests from which to choose. Speak to your doctor about the one that's best for you.



Eat Healthy—eat a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Eat less red meat and processed meats.



Stop smoking—talk to your doctor about ways you can quit.



Maintain a healthy weight



Add calcium and Vitamin D to your diet



Get regular exercise—even taking a brisk walk each day can help.



Cut down on alcohol intake to no more than 1–2 drinks per day.



Know your family history—knowing whether members of your family have had colorectal or other types of cancer can help you take control and see how you can decrease your risk.

Questions for the Doctor

1. What is my risk for colorectal cancer?
2. When do you recommend that I start getting tested?
3. What are the different types of screening tests for colorectal cancer?
4. Which screening test do you recommend for me? Why?
5. How often do I need to get tested?
6. What happens during the test? How do I prepare?
7. Does the test have any risks or side effects?
8. How long will it take to get the results?
9. What can I do to reduce my risk of colorectal cancer?

Bottom Line

Do what you can to reduce the risks for colorectal cancer you CAN control. If you are concerned about your risks, speak to your doctor to develop a plan for how you can reduce your risks. One of the most important things you can do to reduce your risk for colorectal cancer is get screened. Your doctor can recommend a screening test that's right for you.

