

Don't let colonoscopies scare you to death



Colon cancer symptoms

Colorectal cancer might not cause symptoms right away, but if it does, it may cause one or more of the following:

- Rectal bleeding
- Blood in the stool, making it look dark brown or black
- Unintended weight loss
- Fatigue
- Abdominal pain
- Changes in bowel movements, such as narrowing of the stool, worsening constipation or diarrhea

Most often, colon cancer has no symptoms at all.¹

The best defense against colon cancer

Vigilance

Your own vigilance is the best defense against colon cancer. This entails three things:

- 1. Making lifestyle changes that may prevent or reduce your risk of colon cancer.** Even for people with high risk of colorectal cancer, research shows that lifestyle changes can decrease the risk of getting it. This includes quitting smoking, limiting alcohol intake, maintaining a healthy diet and weight and exercising regularly.

- 2. Monitoring your own body for signs and symptoms of colon cancer.** Self-screening can help spot colon cancer early. This can be done by taking at-home tests every two years. The tests only take a few minutes to perform and can be completed without adjusting your diet or medications. Also keep an eye out for the signs and symptoms of colon cancer. If you notice any changes in your stool, body or energy level, consult with your doctor.

- 3. Making sure that you are screened regularly by your healthcare provider.** Colonoscopy screenings can identify growths before they become cancerous and even before symptoms start developing. That's why it's important to have regularly scheduled colonoscopies to help detect colon cancer as early as possible. The American Cancer Society recommends a screening colonoscopy at age 45 and regular ten-year intervals after that and continuing until at least age 75 for people with average risk of colon cancer. People with increased or high risk might need to start colorectal cancer screening before age 45, be screened more often and/or get specific tests. If this is the case, speak to your healthcare provider on exact recommendations and what test or procedure is right for you.¹

Colonoscopies

Colonoscopies scare a lot of people because they're afraid that the preparation will be awful and that they'll feel pain during the procedure.

The requirements for prep may vary from country to country. You may be asked to restrict your diet for a couple of days before the procedure. The night before the procedure, the usual prep is to take a laxative, either in pill form or liquid form. Once the laxative takes effect, you'll probably spend a lot of time in the bathroom. The reason you need to clean out your colon is so that the doctor doesn't miss any masses across the length of the colon.

During the colonoscopy itself, you should be given light sedation that ensures you won't feel any pain. In fact, most people sleep through the whole procedure.

While you sleep, the doctor inserts a flexible tube with a camera at the end (called a colonoscope) looking up the length of the colon for abnormalities. Colon polyps are growths on the inside of the colon wall. Most are benign (harmless) and some are malignant (cancerous). If polyps are found, your doctor may remove them immediately or take tissue samples (biopsies) for analysis. If malignant, there could be additional steps taken towards treatment.²

If you do have polyps, the doctor may want to increase the frequency of your colonoscopies to see if you are prone to developing them. This is something you'll need to discuss with your healthcare provider once you get the results of the procedure.

Remember that colon cancer has a 90 percent survival rate when detected at the early stages.¹ Try to remind yourself of that while you're hesitating to make your appointment for a colonoscopy or debating whether to cancel the appointment you have because you're too nervous, scared or uncomfortable. While it's true the test is not entirely pleasant, preparation is what people tend to dread most.

But long after you've forgotten the discomfort, you'll remember that you took charge of your own life and defended yourself against a very nasty and potentially deadly form of cancer.



Sources:

1. American Cancer Society. Early Detection, Diagnosis and Staging, November 17, 2020. Available from www.cancer.org.
2. Mayo Clinic. Colonoscopy, May 18, 2022. Available from www.mayoclinic.org.

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