

colon cancer

protect yourself: know the facts

What is colon cancer?

The colon and rectum are parts of the digestive system. Colon cancer begins when cells that are not normal grow inside the colon or rectum. The cancer often begins as a small growth called a polyp. Polyps are not cancer, but they can turn into cancer over time. Colon cancer is one of the leading causes of cancer deaths in Kentucky.

What are the symptoms?

There usually are no symptoms of colon cancer at first. When the disease is more advanced, symptoms may include blood in the stool, a change in bowel habits, cramps, weight loss, a tired feeling, and nausea. These symptoms can be caused by other health conditions. People with these symptoms should see their doctor.

What is screening?

Screening means looking for signs of disease before symptoms appear. There are two types of tests that check for signs of colon cancer.

- **Stool Tests:** These tests look for signs

of colon cancer in the stool and can be done at home with a kit that is used to collect a sample. The sample is sent to a lab to be tested. Examples of these tests include Fecal Occult Blood Tests (FOBT/FIT) and Stool DNA tests.

- **Visual Tests:** These tests are done by a doctor who looks for signs of cancer inside the colon and rectum with a thin, lighted tube. Examples include Colonoscopy, Flexible Sigmoidoscopy, and CT Colonography.

How often you take the screening test depends on the type of test you choose. It is important to talk to your doctor about which test is right for you!

Why is cancer screening important?

Screening saves lives. Colon cancer screening is important because there usually are no symptoms at first. A colon cancer screening test can find cancer early, when it is easiest to treat. Colonoscopy can also find polyps and other growths that are not normal. Removing these growths can stop colon cancer from developing.

Who should be screened?

The chance of developing colon cancer increases with age. People who are at



average risk should talk to their doctor about colon cancer screening beginning at age 45. You may be at higher risk and need to begin screening at an earlier age if:

- You or a close relative has had colon polyps or colon cancer.
- You have inflammatory bowel disease or certain hereditary conditions.

It is important to speak with your doctor about your risk factors to determine when YOU should begin screening.

What if I can't afford the tests?

Most cancer screenings are covered by insurance, Medicare, and Medicaid. You should check with your insurance company to find out more details, which can vary by plan. You may also want to review the ACA and Cancer Fact Sheet available at www.kycancer.org. Additionally, Kentucky Colon Cancer Screening Program offers free colon cancer screening services for those meeting eligibility requirements. Please review KCP's **Pathfinder** – an online, searchable guide – to help you find financial aid available in your community. Visit www.kycancerprogram.org and click on the Pathfinder link.

How can I reduce my chance of getting colon cancer?

- **Talk with your doctor about which screening test is right for you and how often to be screened.** Many colon cancer deaths could be prevented with regular screening.

- Don't smoke.
- Eat a healthy diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables. Limit high-fat foods, red meat, and processed meat.
- Exercise and stay at a healthy weight.
- Limit alcohol intake to no more than 2 drinks per day for men, and 1 drink per day for women.

Where can I get more information?

KCP's **Pathfinder** can link you to cancer support and services nearest you. Visit www.kycancerprogram.org to find cancer resources in your community, or to contact your local **Kentucky Cancer Program** office.

For information on all types of cancer, contact:

- **National Cancer Institute, 1-800-4-CANCER, www.cancer.gov**
- **American Cancer Society, 1-800-ACS-2345, www.cancer.org**
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov**

This fact sheet was developed by the Kentucky Cancer Program at the University of Kentucky Markey Cancer Center. The information comes from the National Cancer Institute, the American Cancer Society, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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www.kycancerprogram.org

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