

# colon cancer

## protect yourself: know the facts

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### 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, common symptoms include blood in the stool, a change in bowel habits, cramps, weight loss, a tired feeling, and nausea.

### What is screening?

Screening means looking for signs of disease before symptoms appear. There are several tests that check for signs of colon cancer. They may be used alone or together. The tests may be uncomfortable, but they could save your life. Two common tests are:

Fecal occult blood test: You can do this test at home with a kit your health care

provider will give you. This test checks for blood in the stool.

Colonoscopy: The doctor inserts a thin lighted tube into the rectum and colon to check for polyps or cancer while the patient is under anesthesia.

### Why is cancer screening important?

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

### Who should be screened?

**People age 50 or older should be screened regularly.** The chance of getting colon cancer increases with age. More than 90 percent of people who



get colon cancer are age 50 or older. Younger people with other risk factors should talk to their doctor about when and how often to be screened.

### What are some other risk factors?

Your chance of getting the disease increases if you have a close relative who has had colon polyps or colon cancer, or if you have inflammatory bowel disease.

### Will my insurance cover the tests?

Most insurance plans cover colon screening tests for people age 50 or older. Medicare covers colon cancer screening for people 65 or older.

### 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. **At least one third of colon cancer deaths could be prevented if everyone age 50 and older got screened regularly.**
- Eat a healthy diet. Avoid high-fat foods, limit red meat and processed meat, and eat plenty of fruits and vegetables.
- Exercise for 30-45 minutes at least

five days a week.

- Stay at a healthy weight.
- If you drink alcohol, have no more than one drink a day.

### Where can I get more information?

For information about cancer resources in your community, call your local Kentucky Cancer Program office. For contact information, visit our website at [www.kcp.uky.edu](http://www.kcp.uky.edu) and click on the city nearest you.

For information on all types of cancer, call the National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service at **1-800-4-CANCER** or go to [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov), or call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-ACS-2345** or go to [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

For information locally, call **270-442-1310**.

*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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