Five things to know about colorectal cancer screenings

FROM PREMERA BLUE CROSS BLUE SHIELD OF ALASKA



Access to affordable care is the cornerstone for a healthy community, and getting your preventive screenings is a critical component of staying healthy. Here are five things you need to know about colorectal cancer and preventive colonoscopy screenings, which can help you understand what they are, why they are important, and how to access care.

1 **What is colorectal cancer?** The colon and rectum make up the large intestine, which is part of the digestive system. Colon cancer is cancer of the colon. Rectal cancer is cancer in the rectum. Together they are colorectal cancer. Most colorectal cancers start as a growth, or polyp, on the inner lining of the colon or rectum. Polyps are common as people get older. Most polyps are noncancerous, but some can turn into cancer.[1] Colorectal cancer usually develops slowly over a period of 10 to 15 years.[2]

2 **Why is screening important?** Colorectal cancer is the fourth most diagnosed cancer and the second leading cause of cancer death.[3] Often, there are no symptoms. If there are symptoms, they may not appear until the cancer is more advanced. That's why regular screening beginning at age 45 is critical. Screening looks for polyps, which are removed before they can develop into cancers. When colorectal cancer is found early before it spreads, the five-year survival rate is about 90%.[2] If left untreated, cancer can spread to other organs (like the lungs or liver) and you may need surgery to remove organs (like the colon) where cancer has spread.[4] It can also lead to death. The good news is with regular screenings, colorectal cancer is preventable, treatable, and beatable.

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3 **What are common symptoms of colorectal cancer?** It's important to know that sometimes the symptoms of colorectal cancer can be no symptoms at all. Here are some common symptoms:

- Blood in your stool or bleeding from the rectum
- Unexplained fatigue or weakness
- Anemia (often related to a loss of blood)
- Persistent cramps or low back pain
- Unexplained or unintentional weight loss
- Changes in bowel habits

Contact your provider when symptoms are persistent.

4 **What kinds of screenings are available?** People with a parent, sibling, or offspring with colorectal cancer have two to three times the risk of developing colon cancer. Talk to your primary care provider (PCP) about which screening is right for you. Depending on your family history and risk factors, they might recommend one over another.

- **At-home screening options** have made colon cancer screenings much simpler. A fecal immunochemical test (FIT) is simple. This FIT test looks for hidden blood in your stool and can be done at home without special preparation. If blood is found, it's recommended that you follow up with a gastroenterologist (GI doctor) or your primary care provider as soon as possible. There are two types of test kits on the market for at-home colon cancer screening: Standard FIT kits and Cologuard* (DNA FIT).
- **Colonoscopies** are done at an outpatient hospital or ambulatory surgical center. They are covered by many plans as part of preventive cancer screenings starting at age 45. While colonoscopies certainly aren't pleasant, they can be lifesaving. If you have a strong family history of colon cancer, you may be covered for a colonoscopy at an earlier age. You may also be covered for more frequent repeat screenings if you've had past tests that found precancerous growths (or polyps). A colonoscopy examines the entire colon. The test includes a consultation prior to your screening and preparation, and gentle sedation is often used (although some people may need anesthesia). Your initial screening colonoscopy is covered in full on many plans, even if polyps are found (whether benign or cancerous). Follow-up colonoscopies for those who have had a cancerous polyp are not considered screening and are subject to a copay and your deductible.

5 **Where and how can you get care?** Your primary care provider is your first stop for an annual preventive wellness exam. They can recommend what type of screening is right for you and where to get a colonoscopy. Premera has several options for members, including easy access to primary care providers through Kinwell clinics. Schedule an appointment at **kinwellhealth.com**. Or find an in-network provider using the Find Care tool on **premera.com**. Sign in and browse by category using the Primary Care tile.

Colonoscopies are done at an outpatient hospital or ambulatory surgical center by a gastroenterologist. To find an ambulatory surgical center near you, use the Find care tool on **premera.com**. Sign in and type Ambulatory Surgical Center into the search bar.

If you are diagnosed with colorectal cancer, Premera is here to support you. Find more information on our Care Essentials page, under **Cancer**. Our **Personal Health Support** care team can answer questions about treatment and coverage, plan and coordinate your care, and transfer medical records. Speak with a care manager at 888-742-1479, Monday through Friday, 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Saturday, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Pacific Time.

Want to know about other covered cancer screenings?
Use our 5 Things Guides on **breast**, **cervical**, and **general preventive** screenings.

[1]What is Colorectal Cancer? **https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/colon-rectal-cancer/about/what-is-colorectal-cancer.html**, American Cancer Society, January 29, 2024

[2]Can Colorectal Polyps and Cancer Be Found Early?
https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/colon-rectal-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/detection.html, American Cancer Society, January 29, 2024

[3] Key Statistics for Colorectal Cancer,
https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/colon-rectal-cancer/about/key-statistics.html, American Cancer Society, January 29, 2024

[4]Surgery for Colon Cancer, **https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/colon-rectal-cancer/treating/colon-surgery.html**, American Cancer Society, January 29, 2024

*Cologuard services may be subject to additional out-of-pocket expense.