

Women's Health Center of Excellence for Research, Leadership, Education

Fact Sheet

Colon Cancer Tests

If you are age 50 or over, it is important to get tested for colon cancer. Cancer of the colon and rectum combined (colorectal cancer) is the third most common form of cancer in both men and women. But it also is one of the most curable cancers, if found early.

How Do I Get Tested?

Four tests help find colorectal cancer early:

- 1. **Digital Rectal Exam:** A doctor puts a gloved finger in the rectum to feel for lumps or other problems. This test can only check the rectum. This test should be done just before having a sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy.
- 2. **Fecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT):** Even if we can't feel it, cancer and polyps can bleed inside us. The FOBT test looks for hidden blood in the stool. You will take a test kit home to get the samples. The samples are taken for three days in a row. Ask your doctor about what you should eat during the time you are taking the samples. You may be told not to eat red meat and given some other tips.
- 3. **Sigmoidoscopy:** A doctor places a flexible, hollow, lighted tube in the rectum to check for cancer. If something is found, the next step usually is a colonoscopy.
- 4. **Colonoscopy:** A longer tube is used for this test. It can check the entire colon. It also has a small wire loop inside the tube that can be used to cut out small polyps. Most likely, you will be given some medicine to relax during this test.

If you are age 50 or older you should:

- ▶ Have a FOBT test every year.
- ▶ Have a sigmoidoscopy every 5 years or a colonoscopy every 10 years.

Talk to your doctor about testing at age 40 if:

- **Someone** in your family has had colon cancer.
- You have had polyps or other bowel problems.

Remember to talk to your doctor about these tests. Even though you cannot feel anything, it's important to get checked before problems start!

This information is general. If your doctor tells you something different, follow his or her instructions.

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For more information about women's health issues, stop by our Resource Center at 2000 West First Street, Piedmont Plaza II, 1st Floor, Winston Salem, NC 27104, visit our website at http://www.wakehealth.edu/WHCOE/ or contact us at (336) 713-4220.