

Screening Colonoscopy for Colon Cancer

Compiled by Dr. David Epstein

Colon cancer is second only to lung cancer as a cause of cancer death. In the USA it is the third most common type of cancer in both men and women and in 2006 over 55,000 people died of colon cancer. More than 90% of all colon cancers occur over the age of fifty.

What causes colon cancer?

A number of factors are associated with colon cancer. These include: increasing age; lifestyle factors such as smoking, alcohol and obesity; high fat, low fibre diet; genetics; conditions such as Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis; and colon polyps.

What is a cancer screening test?

A cancer screening test is performed in a person without any symptoms of the disease. The aim is to identify the condition early therefore increasing the chance of cure.

Why should I have a screening test for colon cancer but not other cancers?

Firstly colon cancer is common. Secondly colon cancer starts in a benign polyp and then slowly develops into a malignant cancer. Colon polyps grow "silently" in the colon and seldom cause any symptoms. This slow development from a polyp into a cancer allows for early detection. Colonoscopy allows visualisation of the colon and is therefore a good screening tool. Other cancers may not have this slow evolution making screening and early detection difficult.

Who should undergo a screening colonoscopy?

High risk individuals are people with a first degree relative with colon cancer, people with a hereditary cancer syndrome in their family (Familial Adenomatous Polyposis or Hereditary Non-polyposis Colon Cancer), people with inflammatory bowel disease or people with previous colon cancer or polyps. High risk individuals need to discuss the timing and frequency of their colonoscopy with their specialist.

Average risk individuals: everyone else!

When should average risk individuals have their colonoscopy?

All average risk individuals should have at least one screening colonoscopy in their lifetime. Most guidelines suggest that the first colonoscopy should be at age 50 as colon cancer occurs in the majority of people after the age of fifty. If your first screening colonoscopy is normal then it is advisable that the colonoscopy be repeated at 10 yearly intervals. It is unlikely that starting screening after age 75 is of any health benefit.

Are there alternatives to colonoscopy?

Yes there are other methods of screening for colon cancer.

1. An annual stool test for occult (hidden blood). This will not identify polyps only early cancer.
2. Barium enema. This is an x-ray test of the colon which is not as accurate at identifying polyps.
3. CT scan of the colon. This is more accurate than a barium enema but will need to be followed by a colonoscopy if any abnormality is identified. Small polyps may be missed on CT colonography.

The pros and cons of these various methods can be discussed with Dr. Epstein.

Whose recommendations are these?

The above recommendations have been published by the American Cancer Society, United States Centre for Disease Control and the American College of Gastroenterology.