

AICR Guidelines for Cancer Prevention

- Choose mostly plant foods, limit red meat and avoid processed meat.
- Be physically active every day in any way for 30 minutes or more.
- Aim to be a healthy weight throughout life.

*And always remember—
do not smoke or chew tobacco.*

For More Information

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American Institute for Cancer Research
1759 R Street, NW
PO Box 97167
Washington, DC 20090-7167
1-800-843-8114 or 202-328-7744
www.aicr.org

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Reducing Your Risk of Colorectal Cancer



American Institute
for Cancer Research

Stopping cancer before it starts

Stopping Cancer Series

“What is colorectal cancer?”

Colorectal cancer is a tumor caused by abnormal division of the cells lining the large intestine—the part of the digestive tract where waste material is stored. The disease takes many years to develop and the cancer is frequently preceded by benign growths (adenomatous polyps) that form on the lining of the large intestine.

“How common is colorectal cancer?”

Colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer among adults worldwide. Approximately 150,000 new cases are diagnosed annually. Close to 50,000 deaths are attributed to it each year.

“Is colorectal cancer inherited?”

Roughly 20 percent of cases of colorectal cancer occur in people who have a family history of the disease. If you have one first-degree relative (such as a parent, sibling or child) who has had colorectal cancer, your lifetime risk increases from two percent to six percent; your risk increases to 15 percent if that relative was under age 45 when diagnosed. If two or more close relatives have a history of the disease, your risk is even greater—up to a 16 percent lifetime risk, according to the National Cancer Institute.

“How can I reduce my risk of colorectal cancer?”

Research shows that food and nutrition, along with physical activity, play a very important role in the prevention and causation of colorectal cancer. According to AICR’s *Second Expert Report, Food, Nutrition, Physical Activity, and the Prevention of Cancer: a Global Perspective*, the following changes in your diet and lifestyle can reduce your risk of developing colorectal cancer:

- Be physically active every day, in any way, for 30 minutes or more.
- If you drink at all, limit alcohol to one drink per day for women and two drinks per day for men
- Limit red meat to 18 oz. per week and avoid processed meat
- Maintain a healthy weight throughout life and avoid weight gain—particularly fat around the midsection.

In addition to a healthy diet and daily activity, get regular screenings by a doctor beginning at age 50.

“Does early detection make a difference?”

Yes. For patients whose cancers are found early and treated before spreading, the five-year survival rate is 90 percent. But less than half of colorectal cancers are diagnosed at an early stage. Survival rates drop dramatically after cancer has spread to other parts of the body. Early detection is very important.

Diet and Lifestyle... Important Risk Factors You Can Control

Experts agree that diet and physical activity are the most important environmental influences on colorectal cancer. Choices you make every day can improve your general health and may help reduce your risk of colorectal cancer.

1. Physical activity—of all types—decreases colorectal cancer risk. Be physically active for at least 30 minutes every day and, as your fitness improves, aim for a target of 60 minutes. While vigorous activities like aerobics and jogging are certainly beneficial, you also can benefit from enjoying a range of more moderate activities such as swimming, dancing or taking a brisk walk. Also note that shorter bouts of physical activity (10 minutes here, 15 minutes there) all count toward your daily quota. If you are not currently active, check with your doctor before starting an exercise program.
2. Red meat and processed meat have both been implicated in causing colorectal cancer. Eat no more than 18 oz. of beef, pork or lamb a week. Keep your portions small (3 oz. per meal, roughly the size of a deck of playing cards, no more than six times a week) or choose to eat somewhat larger portions less often (such as 6 oz. three times per week). In general, avoid processed meats. This includes meat preserved through smoking, curing, salting or with chemical preservatives, such as bacon, ham, salami, sausage and hot dogs. Save them to eat on special occasions—maybe some ham during a holiday or a hot dog at a baseball game.
3. There is convincing evidence that alcohol causes colorectal cancer in men and probably causes colorectal cancer in women. To decrease your risk, limit alcoholic drinks to one drink per day for women and two drinks per day for men, if you choose to drink at all.

4. Maintaining a healthy body weight brings many health benefits, including a reduced risk of colorectal cancer. Research shows that body fat, and fat around the midsection in particular, increases your risk of the disease. To stop weight gain, limit high fat, high calorie foods, including fast food and sugary drinks; keep an eye on portion sizes; and be physically active every day.
5. Increasing dietary fiber is associated with a probable decrease in colorectal cancer risk. Eat a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans to improve your fiber intake. Current recommendations call for 21 to 38 grams of dietary fiber daily, depending on age and gender. However, some research suggests that for cancer prevention, it may be best to aim for at least 30 grams a day. Whole grains and beans are good sources: one slice of whole-wheat bread has roughly 2 grams of fiber, a 1 oz. serving of a high-fiber cereal supplies 5 or more grams of fiber and ½ cup of beans contains about 7 grams. A half-cup portion of chopped vegetables can give you 2 to 4 grams of fiber. Each serving of fruit as a snack or for dessert boosts your dietary fiber intake another 2 to 3 grams.

Early Detection Saves Lives

Colorectal cancer often produces symptoms at an early enough stage to make it treatable. However, successful treatment depends on early detection. Follow these guidelines.

- 1) **Rate your risk.** Anyone can get colorectal cancer. But higher risk factors include:
 - Family history of colorectal cancer
 - Personal history of polyps or inflammatory bowel disease
 - Being over 50 years of age
 - Cigarette smoking
 - Diet low in fiber

Be Alert to Possible Symptoms

If you have any of the following symptoms, you should check with your doctor:

- A change in bowel habits, like prolonged diarrhea or constipation
 - Feeling that the bowel doesn't empty completely
 - Blood in the stool (either bright red or very dark) or rectal bleeding
 - Stools smaller in width than usual
 - General abdominal discomfort (like frequent gas pains, bloating, fullness or cramps)
 - Weight loss for no known reason
 - Abnormal fatigue
 - Vomiting
-
- Diet high in red meat and processed meat
 - Alcohol consumption
 - Lack of physical activity
 - Substantial consumption of alcohol (more than 3 drinks per day)
 - Body fat, particularly excess fat around the midsection

If you are concerned that you are at risk, speak to your doctor. You may need screening tests more often or at an earlier age.

2) Have regular exams by a physician.

Beginning at age 50, you should have screening tests performed, even if you have no symptoms of colorectal cancer. The exams include:

Fecal occult blood test

Sigmoidoscopy

Colonoscopy

Double contrast barium enema

A digital rectal exam (DRE) should be done at the same time as sigmoidoscopy, colonoscopy or double contrast barium enema.



Frequently Asked Questions

"My father was diagnosed with polyps in his colon. Are they related to cancer?"

Polyps are benign growths on the linings of the colon or rectum. They are often found in people over age 50. Research shows that most colorectal cancers arise from certain types of polyps (adenomas). Removing these precancerous growths is one way to prevent cancer. Because new polyps develop in nearly half of the people who have them removed, these people must be monitored regularly.

"How do fruits and vegetables play a role in colorectal cancer prevention?"

Along with fiber, research shows that vegetables and fruits contain protective compounds found naturally in plants, known as phytochemicals. These substances seem to help our cells fend off DNA damage that can eventually lead to colorectal and other types of cancer. Because hundreds of different phytochemicals in plant foods work together to protect your health, eat an abundant variety of produce for the most health protection.