

# Cancer Prevention and Screenings

Cancer claims a huge economic, emotional and physical toll on families and society. In 2010, an estimated 1.5 million Americans were diagnosed with cancer, and more than 500,000 died from the disease. The National Institutes of Health estimates that one out of three cancer deaths could be avoided through proper screening. Besides saving lives, screenings also detect earlier-stage cancers so treatment is often less aggressive than that for more advanced cancers.

Screening tests can help find cancer at an early stage, before symptoms appear. When cancer is found early, it may be easier to treat or cure. By the time symptoms appear, the cancer may have grown and spread, making it harder to treat.

There are four different kinds of screening tests:

- A **physical exam** checks for signs of disease, such as lumps, irregular moles or anything else that seems unusual. The physician will also take a history of the patient's health habits, family history and previous illnesses.
- **Laboratory tests** examine samples of tissue, blood, urine or other substances in the body for abnormalities. A Pap smear is a common laboratory test used to look for cells that could lead to cervical cancer.
- **Imaging procedures**, such as mammography or colonoscopy, spot irregular growths or tumors inside the body.
- **Genetic tests** look for certain gene mutations (changes) that are linked to some types of cancer. For instance, the BRCA gene test looks for changes in a specific protein linked to breast cancer susceptibility.

Your healthcare provider will help you determine which type of screening tests are right for you.

Screening tests usually do not diagnose cancer. If a screening test result is abnormal, more tests may be done to check for cancer. For example, a screening mammogram may find a lump in the breast. A lump may be cancer or it may be something else. More tests need to be done to find out if the lump is cancer. These are called diagnostic tests.



It is important to remember that when your doctor suggests a screening test, it does not mean he or she thinks you have cancer. Screening tests are done when you have no cancer symptoms.

Cancer screening recommendations come from more than one source. The National Cancer Institute (NCI), the American Cancer Society (ACS), the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, the American Medical Association and various other medical organizations have all developed cancer screening guidelines. Generally, their recommendations are consistent with each other but there are some discrepancies. Check official Websites for up-to-date screening recommendations and discuss the options with your physician. Many screening tests are covered by insurance, without co-pay, under the U.S. Affordable Care Act.

Check out the following websites:

- National Cancer Institute <http://www.cancer.gov/>
- American Cancer Society <http://www.cancer.org/>
- U.S. Preventive Services Task Force <http://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/>
- American Medical Association <http://www.amaassn.org/>

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## Colorectal Cancer

The American Cancer Society (ACS) recommends that beginning at age 50, people should follow one of the following screening schedules.

Tests that find polyps and cancer include:

- A flexible sigmoidoscopy every 5 years
- A colonoscopy every 10 years
- A double-contrast barium enema every 5 years, or
- A CT colonography also called a virtual colonoscopy every 5 years.

Tests that find cancer, but not polyps, include:

- A fecal occult blood test (gFOBT) every year
- A fecal immunochemical test (FIT) every year, or
- A stool DNA test (sDNA). For this test the schedule is still undetermined.

## Skin Cancer

The only screening procedure for skin cancer is a routine visual exam of the skin for abnormalities. Regular exams of the skin by both you and your doctor increase the chance of finding skin cancer early.

## Cervical Cancer

Most cases of cervical cancer are preventable with screening. The ACS recommends:

- All women should begin screening about three years after they become sexually active, but no later than 21. Screening should be done every year with the regular Pap test or every two years using the newer liquid-based Pap test.
- Beginning at 30, women who have had three normal Pap test results in a row may opt for screening every two to three years.
- Women 70 or older who have had three normal Pap tests in a row or have had no abnormal Pap test results in the last 10 years may choose to stop having the test.
- Women who have had a total hysterectomy may also choose to stop testing, unless the surgery was done as a treatment for cervical cancer.

## Prostate Cancer

Research has not yet proven that the potential benefits of testing for prostate cancer outweigh the harms of testing and treatment. The ACS recommends that men make an informed decision with their doctor about whether to be tested.

## Breast Cancer

Mammograms cut breast cancer death rates. The ACS recommends:

- Yearly mammograms starting at 40 for as long as a woman is in good health.
- Clinical breast exam every three years for women in their 20s and 30s, and every year for women 40 and over.
- Women should know how their breasts normally look and feel and report any changes promptly to their doctor.

## Prevention

Scientists estimate that as many as 50% to 70% of cancer deaths in the US are caused by poor lifestyle choices. Cancer preventive lifestyle choices include:

- **Stay away from tobacco!** Stopping smoking is the single most important step you can take to prevent cancer.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** Obesity is estimated to cause 14% of cancer deaths in men and 20% of cancer deaths in women.
- **Get moving!** Regular physical activity – about 30 minutes on most days – is believed to decrease the risk of breast, colon, prostate and endometrial cancers.
- **Limit alcohol!** Moderate to heavy alcohol use is linked to some cancers.
- **Protect your skin!** It is believed that 90% of the skin cancers could be prevented by using sun protection.
- **Consider vaccination!** Two vaccines that prevent infection by cancer-causing viruses are available. One prevents infection with hepatitis B virus, which can lead to liver cancer. The other protects against infection with strains of human papillomavirus (HPV) that cause cervical cancer. Talk to your physician to find out if either one is appropriate for you.

Sources:

<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/screening>

<http://www.cancer.org/Healthy/FindCancerEarly/CancerScreeningGuidelines/american-cancer-society-guidelines-for-the-early-detection-of-cancer>