

Colorectal Cancer: Risk Factors



Understanding colorectal cancer is an important part of staying healthy. It can affect anyone but knowing your specific risk factors can help.

A risk factor is anything that may increase your chances of having a disease. There are some risk factors that you can't control. This includes your family history, but you may decrease other risk factors such as making some healthy lifestyle changes.

Risk factors for colorectal cancer

Here are some common ones:

- **Age.** Colorectal cancer increases as people get older, however, it can occur at any age. Most cases occur in those over 50 years old.
- **Race and ethnicity.** American Indian, Alaska Native, and African Americans have the highest risk for colorectal cancer in the U.S. Jews whose families are from Eastern Europe (Ashkenazi Jews) have one of the highest colorectal cancer risks of any ethnic group in the world.
- **Sex.** Men are slightly more likely to have this cancer than women.
- **History of colorectal polyps.** Polyps are growths in your colon and rectum. They are common in adults older than age 50. They're often benign, which means they are not cancer. But over time, polyps can turn into cancer. Some polyps are called adenomas. If you have had these removed in the past, you have a greater risk of additional polyps and of colorectal cancer.
- **Personal history of colorectal or other cancers.** If you previously had colorectal cancer, you have a higher risk of getting it again.
- **Ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease.** Also called inflammatory bowel disease, these conditions can cause an inflamed colon lining over a long period of time.
- **Family history.** A family history of colorectal cancer or polyps in a close relative like a parent, sibling, or child increases your risk. Your risk is even higher if your relative was diagnosed before age 50. It's also higher if more than one relative was diagnosed. However, most people with colorectal cancer don't have a family history.
- **Certain inherited syndromes.** There are some syndromes that carry a higher risk of colorectal disease. These include familial adenomatous polyposis and Lynch syndrome (also called hereditary nonpolyposis colon cancer).
- **Weight.** Colorectal cancer is more common in people who are overweight or obese. This is even more true for men.
- **Being less active.** People who are less physically active have an increased risk for the disease.
- **Diet.** Eating a lot of red meat has been linked to an increased risk for colorectal cancer. This includes beef, pork, lamb, and veal. Diets high in processed meats, such as hot dogs and lunch meats, also increase risk.
- **Alcohol use.** People who drink more alcohol than recommended are more likely to get colorectal cancer.
- **Type 2 diabetes.** Research has shown a link between type 2 diabetes and a higher risk for colorectal cancer.
- **Smoking.** Smoking raises your risk for colorectal cancer.

Ways to lower your risk

Although you can't control some risk factors, you can do a lot to lower your risk for colorectal cancer. Some ways include:

- Increasing physical activity. Experts recommend that adults get 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each week.
- Eating healthy foods. This should include plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Avoid red and processed meats.
- Limiting or avoiding alcohol. For men, limit yourself to two drinks per day. For women, stop at one. It's best not to drink alcohol.
- Not using tobacco products. Talk with your provider if you need help quitting.

Don't skip screening

A healthy lifestyle can go a long way in limiting your risk factors. But no matter your risk level, it's important to have regular screening for colorectal cancer. Screening can find polyps early, before they turn into cancer. It can also help diagnose cancer early, when it's easier to treat. There are several options for screening. Talk with your healthcare provider about when you should start screenings, which type is best for you, and how often you should have them.

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