



## Preventing colorectal cancer

Doctors can't always explain why one person gets cancer and another doesn't. However, scientists have studied general patterns of cancer in the population to learn what things around us and what actions may increase our chance of developing cancer.

Anything that increases a person's chance of developing a disease is called a risk factor; anything that decreases a person's chance of developing a disease is called a protective factor. Some of the risk factors for cancer can be avoided, but many can't. For example, although you can choose to quit smoking, you can't choose which genes you have inherited from your parents. Both smoking and inheriting specific genes could be considered risk factors for certain kinds of cancer, but only smoking can be avoided. Prevention means avoiding the risk factors and increasing the protective factors that can be controlled, so the chance of developing cancer decreases.

While many risk factors can be avoided, it's important to know that avoiding risk factors doesn't guarantee that you'll be cancer-free. Also, most people with a particular risk factor for cancer don't actually get the disease. Others may be more sensitive to factors that can cause cancer. Talk to your doctor about prevention methods that might be effective for you.

### Colorectal cancer

Cancer of the colon or rectum is often called colorectal cancer. The colon and rectum are part of the large intestine, which is part of the digestive system.

Tumors found in the colon or rectum may be benign (noncancerous) growths of tissue called polyps, or malignant (cancerous) growths of tissue that can spread to other parts of the body.

## Significance of colorectal cancer

Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States (U.S.). The number of new cases in the U.S. has been dropping slightly, and the number of colorectal cancer-related deaths has been decreasing. The risk of colorectal cancer tends to increase after the age of 40.

## Colorectal cancer warning signs

While there aren't always obvious signs, some common symptoms of colorectal cancer include:

- A change in bowel habits.
- Diarrhea, constipation or feeling that the bowel does not empty completely.
- Blood (either bright red or very dark) in the stool.
- Stools that are narrower than usual.
- General stomach discomfort (frequent gas pains, bloating, fullness and/or cramps).
- Weight loss with no known reason.
- Constant tiredness.
- Vomiting.

If you start to experience any of these, please contact your doctor.

## Colorectal cancer prevention

Colorectal cancer can sometimes be associated with known risk factors, many of which can be avoided. Risk factors include:

**Diet and lifestyle:** Diet and obesity appear to be associated with colorectal cancer risk. Among populations that consume a diet high in fat, protein, calories, alcohol and meat (both red and white), but low in calcium and folate (a water-soluble B vitamin), colorectal cancer is more likely to develop than among populations that consume a low-fat, high-fiber diet.

Calcium-rich foods include milk, yogurt, cheese, kale and broccoli, as well as soft-boned fish like canned sardines and salmon. Folate-rich foods include brussel sprouts, asparagus and dark green leafy vegetables (like spinach and lettuce), as well as fruits like oranges, bananas, cantaloupe and papaya.

A diet low in vitamin D may also increase the risk of colorectal cancer. Vitamin D is made in the body after exposure to sunlight and boosts your body's ability to absorb calcium. It can be found in foods like fatty fish (e.g., salmon, tuna and mackerel) and fortified milk and cereal. And there is also evidence that an inactive lifestyle and smoking cigarettes may increase risk, too.

**Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs:** Some studies have shown that the use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) may reduce the risk of colorectal cancer.

**Polyp removal:** The removal of polyps in the colon may reduce the risk of colorectal cancer.

**Female hormone use:** Postmenopausal female hormone use is associated with a reduced risk of colon cancer, but not rectal cancer.

For more information on colorectal cancer and screening, talk with your doctor or visit [anthem.com/ca](http://anthem.com/ca). Also, check out the following sites:

National Cancer Institute: [cancer.gov](http://cancer.gov)

American Cancer Society: [cancer.org](http://cancer.org)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov)

National Institutes of Health: [nih.gov](http://nih.gov)

