



March is Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month: Time to take charge of your colon health

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Colorectal cancer – often called colon cancer for short – is one of the most common cancers in men and women, and it's a leading cause of cancer deaths. Scientists are currently exploring reasons for an alarming rise in colorectal cancer cases in adults under age 50. Though people of all races and ethnicities can have colorectal cancer, Black men and women have an increased risk of developing the disease.

In honor of Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, our Community Outreach Office is sharing reminders to:

- Get screened for colorectal cancer, starting at age 45 (or earlier if you're at higher-than-average risk for this cancer).
- Learn the warning signs.
- Develop lifestyle habits that can protect your health.

How does screening help?

The beauty of regular colorectal cancer screening is that it allows your doctor to find and remove abnormal growths, called polyps, *before* they turn into cancer. It's also the best way to catch colorectal cancer at an early, treatable stage.

With the rise in colorectal cancer among younger adults, experts now recommend starting regular screening tests at age 45 if you're at average risk for colorectal cancer. People at higher-than-average risk due to a family or personal history of colon cancer might need to screen at an earlier age. It's important to tell your doctor about your family health and cancer history.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) requires private insurers and Medicare to cover the costs of colorectal cancer screening tests. For screening resources available at UT Southwestern, contact the Simmons Cancer Answer Line at CancerAnswerLine@utsouthwestern.edu or 833-722-6237.

Is having a colonoscopy the only way to get screened?

A colonoscopy is considered the “gold standard” for screening. This test allows a doctor to view the rectum and the entire colon. During the exam, the doctor can remove precancerous polyps and some cancers. A colonoscopy isn't the only screening method, however. Other options include:

- A virtual colonoscopy or CT scan of the colon
- Flexible sigmoidoscopy, which looks at the rectum and lower third of the colon
- Stool tests, which find signs of colon cancer (blood or altered DNA) in the stool (poop)

If these tests reveal anything abnormal, you'll need a colonoscopy to complete the screening. Talk with your doctor about the screening methods that could work best for you.

What are the warning signs of colorectal cancer?

Colorectal cancer often doesn't cause symptoms until it has grown or spread. It's important to see a doctor if you experience any of the following [symptoms](#) for more than a few days:

- Abdominal pain
- Rectal bleeding
- Diarrhea, constipation, or narrowing of the stool

A [new study](#), funded in part by the National Cancer Institute, also identifies iron deficiency anemia as a commonly reported symptom in people diagnosed with colorectal cancer before the age of 50.

What else can you do to protect your health?

[Recent statistics](#) show that more than half of all colorectal cancer cases and deaths are related to risk factors such as smoking, an unhealthy diet, high alcohol consumption, physical inactivity, and excess body weight. To take charge of your health:

- Eat a balanced diet rich in whole grains, fish, colorful fruits, and nonstarchy vegetables.
- Stay active and maintain a healthy body weight.
- Limit or avoid alcohol.
- Limit red meat consumption and avoid ultra-processed meats such as bacon, sausage, or hot dogs.
- If you smoke, [seek help quitting](#).

For compassionate support in achieving a healthy weight, contact [UT Southwestern's Weight Wellness Program](#).

Sources: American Cancer Society, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Cancer Institute, American Institute for Cancer Research