



# Talking About Colon Cancer Can Save Your Life:

**A Conversation Guide**



This guide can help you talk with your health care provider and loved ones about screening for colon cancer (also known as colorectal cancer) and make a plan that works best for you. This could save your or a loved one's life.

Read on to learn how to ask about:

- **When to get screened** (Page 3)
- **Your colon cancer screening options** (Page 6)
- **Barriers to getting screened** (Page 7)
- **What to do if you have symptoms** (Page 9)

# 1. When to Get Screened



Anyone can get colon cancer. Most people should get screened for the first time at age 45 and continue screening at least through age 75. People with an increased chance of getting colon cancer may need to start screening before age 45.

When to start screening depends on your personal health history and family's health history. Share this information with your provider and ask:

- When to start colon cancer screening
- What test you should have
- How often to get screened

## Know Your Personal Risk Factors

Some health issues can make it more likely for you to get colon cancer. Tell your provider if you have or had:

- Colon or rectal cancer
- Colon or rectal polyps
- Ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease
- An inherited syndrome such as familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP) or Lynch syndrome
- Cystic fibrosis
- Any other type of cancer

A **polyp** is a small bump or growth in your colon. Most polyps are not cancerous, but some can turn into cancer.



## Talk to Your Family

Sometimes, colon cancer runs in families, which might affect how often you should get screened. Tell your provider if anyone in your family has or had:

- Colon or rectal cancer
- Any other type of cancer
- Colon or rectal polyps
- An inherited syndrome such as FAP or Lynch syndrome

Talk to family members who are related to you by blood (not by marriage or adoption) to gather information about your family's health history. Share your own personal health history with your family too. This will help your entire family plan for colon cancer screening.

Do not worry if you cannot find out every detail. Just find out what you can. **Examples of questions to ask and information to share with your family include:**

**"Did you or Dad ever have a colonoscopy? Did you have any polyps?"**

**"What kind of cancer did my aunt have? Do you remember how old she was?"**

**"I had my colonoscopy last week. They removed two polyps that could have turned into cancer."**

**Focus on close relatives, such as parents, siblings, and children. It is also helpful to know about grandparents and grandchildren, aunts and uncles, and nieces and nephews.**

Write down what you learn in the following sections so you can share it with your provider:

### Colon or rectal cancer:

Which family member?

How old were they when they found out?

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### Colon or rectal polyps:

Which family member?

How old were they when they found out?

Did they have a precancerous polyp (yes, no, or not sure)?\*

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\* If you can find out more details or share a copy of your family member's colonoscopy report, it will help your provider know what to recommend.

### Other types of cancer:

Which family member?

How old were they when they found out?

What type of cancer?

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## 2. Ask About Your Colon Cancer Screening Options



There are multiple options for colon cancer screening. The most common are colonoscopy and different types of stool-based tests. Your provider may also offer other options. All screening tests can help protect you from colon cancer, but they work differently. You may find that one option is easier or better for you.

If you have an increased risk of getting colon cancer, your provider may recommend a colonoscopy as the best option for you.

Knowing how each screening test works and how to prepare for each test can help you make the right decision. You may want to ask your provider:

- How each test works
- How well each test detects polyps and early cancers
- What you have to do to prepare for each test
- How often you need to do each test
- If the tests pose any risks



Examples of questions to ask your provider include:

**“What screening tests can I choose from?”**

**“If my screening test result is not normal, what happens next?”**

Share any concerns you have about screening with your provider. They can help you feel comfortable with the screening test you choose.

For more information about screening options, see the Which Colon Cancer Screening Is Right for Me? fact sheet (available at [nyc.gov/health/coloncancer](https://nyc.gov/health/coloncancer)).



### 3. Ask for Help With Barriers to Getting Screened



Let your provider know about anything that might prevent you from getting screened. They might have solutions you do not know about. For example, your provider may be able to:

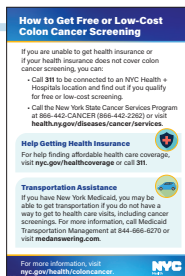
- Write a note to your employer to help you get sick leave for a colonoscopy.
- Help you find a colonoscopy provider close to your home.
- Put a reminder in your medical chart to help you keep up to date with screenings.
- Tell you how to find low- or no-cost screening.
- Explain your options if your test result comes back not normal.

## Examples of questions to ask your provider include:

**“I am afraid of finding out I have colon cancer. If I have it, can it be treated?”**

**“The bowel preparation for the colonoscopy procedure seems complicated. Can we talk about it?”**

If you do not have health insurance or your insurance does not cover screening, see the How to Get Low- or No-Cost Colon Cancer Screening palm card (available at [nyc.gov/health/coloncancer](http://nyc.gov/health/coloncancer)) or call **311**.



Talking to your loved ones can also help you find solutions to barriers that might prevent you or them from getting screened. You may want to:

- Discuss your experiences with screening.
- Share what it is like to do different screening tests.
- Ask for or offer child care, transportation, or other support for a loved one who is having a colonoscopy.

## Examples of questions to ask your loved ones include:

**“How did you manage the bowel preparation for your colonoscopy?”**

**“Was it easy to do the stool-based test?”**

**“I do not have anyone to pick me up after my colonoscopy. Could you find time to go with me to make sure I get home safely?”**

## 4. Ask About What to Do if You Have Symptoms



**See your provider if you have any of these symptoms. Do not wait until your next screening.** These symptoms do not always mean you have cancer. Your provider can help you figure out what is wrong. If it does turn out to be cancer, starting treatment will give you the best chance of getting better.

- Blood in your stool (feces) or in the toilet after a bowel movement
- Stool that looks dark red or black
- Diarrhea or constipation that does not go away
- A change in the shape of your stool
- A feeling that your bowel does not empty completely
- Pain in your belly that keeps happening or does not go away
- Loss of appetite or unexplained weight loss
- Feeling unusually tired or weak



**Examples you could share with your provider include:**

**"I have been having a lot of trouble with constipation over the past month."**

**"I feel like I cannot fully empty my bowels."**

**"This pain has made it difficult for me to focus at work."**







For more information, visit  
[nyc.gov/health/coloncancer](https://nyc.gov/health/coloncancer).

