

Ask The Experts

Is it necessary to go for colorectal cancer screening?

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Q I am a 43-year-old woman. I hear that colorectal cancer affects mainly men above 50. Is it necessary for women to go for screening? If so, what is the procedure like and are there ways to reduce the risk?

A Colorectal cancer is cancer of the large intestine, which consists of the colon and rectum.

It is the most common cancer in Singapore, first among men and second among women (after breast cancer). Thus, women should go for screening too.

Based on the 2015 data from the National Registry of Diseases Office, the incidence rates of colorectal cancer in Singapore increased sharply after the age of 50, with 5,383 men and 4,424 women diagnosed with colorectal cancer between 2011 and 2015. Of the individuals diagnosed with colorectal cancer, more than three in four were above 55 years old.

When to start screening

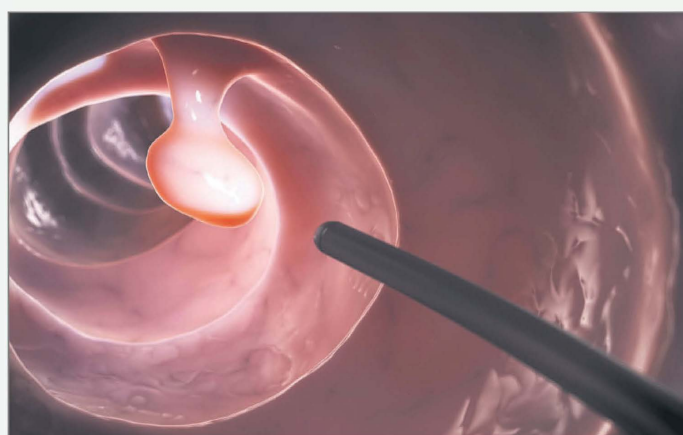
The Ministry of Health recommends that people should screen for colorectal cancer once they reach 50 years of age. However, this age only serves as a guide, as family history should also be taken into consideration.

In general, one should start going for screening 10 years before the age of the youngest colorectal cancer patient in the family; or when one is 50 years old, whichever is earlier.

For example, if you have a family member who had colorectal cancer at the age of 55, you should start screening when you are 45.

This is because colorectal cancer arises from polyps that can take several years to become cancerous.

The screening can help to detect the polyps. Removing them may potentially prevent one from developing colorectal cancer.



Colonoscopy helps to detect colorectal cancer, which arises from polyps in the large intestine.

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Preliminary test

Screening for colorectal cancer can begin with a simple Faecal Immunochemical Test (FIT), which helps to detect occult (invisible) blood in the stool that cannot be seen with the naked eye.

FIT kits are free for Singaporeans and permanent residents aged 50 and above. You can obtain the kit from polyclinics and pharmacies, and carry out the test at home.



■ **Sedentary lifestyle:** If you are not physically active, you may have a higher risk of colorectal cancer. Doing more regular exercise may help lower your risk.

■ **Dietary habit:** Having a diet that is low in fibre and/or high in fat may increase your risk. Try to eat a balanced diet with moderation of all food groups.

■ **Age:** Your risk of colorectal cancer goes up as you age, especially when you are above 50.

■ **Family history:** If your family member has had colorectal cancer and polyps, you may be at a higher risk.

As one can never be entirely free of risk, regular screening is necessary to detect colorectal polyps or cancer early, when it may be easier to treat.

2. Non-modifiable factors

Factors that cannot be modified include:

Colonoscopy

If your FIT results are positive for blood, then you should go for a colonoscopy.

Performed as a day-case procedure, colonoscopy is a safe and accurate method for detecting colorectal polyps or cancer.

It also allows the doctor to perform a biopsy to remove and/or confirm the nature of the lesion seen during the scope.

During the procedure, a scope is inserted up the rectum while the patient is under sedation, so there is minimal discomfort.

Colorectal cancer risk factors

These include modifiable and non-modifiable factors.

1. Modifiable factors

Factors that you can modify or change include:

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