

What Should I Do About Colorectal Cancer Screening?

At MGB, several thousand colonoscopies have been delayed due to COVID-19 and related care disruptions. Currently, it is taking 10-12 months to schedule routine colonoscopies. This sheet describes three colorectal cancer screening options that are reasonable for most people: do one of two stool-based test options- the FIT test or the Cologuard® or schedule a routine colonoscopy.

Purpose

At MGB, our goal is to help people make an informed decision about colorectal cancer screening under our current scheduling constraints. This handout is for people aged 45-75 who are due for colorectal cancer screening tests. The three tests differ in how they are done, how often they are done, and how you prepare for them. Your preferences are important in choosing what test to have. Please use this guide to review your options and inform your primary care team about your preferred test.

Key points

- If you have symptoms such as blood in the stool or a change in your bowel habits, you should discuss these symptoms with your doctor, as a diagnostic colonoscopy may be needed. Stool testing is not appropriate testing to evaluate these symptoms. Diagnostic colonoscopies to evaluate symptoms will be scheduled more quickly than routine screening colonoscopies.
- Colorectal cancer screening can help prevent cancer and find cancer early when it may be easier to treat.
- Both colonoscopy and stool-based tests are good options and will help lower your risk of dying from colorectal cancer. Colonoscopy is better at finding polyps, and removal of pre-cancerous polyps reduces the risk of developing colon cancer.
- People who are at higher risk of colorectal cancer (risk factors include: a personal history of colon polyps, inflammatory bowel disease, a first degree relative who had colon cancer before age 60) should have a colonoscopy. Stool-based tests are not appropriate for patients at higher risk of colorectal cancer.

Medical Terms Used in This Sheet	
Colorectal	Refers to the large intestine (colon) and the end of the large intestine (rectum).
Colonoscopy	Screening test where a long, flexible tube is inserted into the rectum. A tiny video camera allows the doctor to see polyps or cancer inside the entire colon.
Colonoscopy preparation	Drinking a laxative to cleanse the intestines before a colonoscopy.
Diagnostic colonoscopy	A test done to follow-up on symptoms or abnormal results from a stool-based test.
Polyp	A growth in the colon that might turn into cancer.
Screening colonoscopy	A test done to look for disease before there are any symptoms or signs of the disease.
Stool-based tests	A test that checks waste from a bowel movement for blood and other changes that could be signs of cancer. Two common types are Cologuard and FIT test (fecal immunochemical test).

Comparing the Three Options:

What are the options?		
<p>1. Schedule colonoscopy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Referral is needed from your primary care doctor to schedule your colonoscopy. (Colonoscopies are currently being booked out 10-12 months). Contact your doctor if you notice any changes in your bowel habits or blood in your stool. If you develop these symptoms, your doctor will place an urgent referral for a diagnostic colonoscopy. 	<p>2. FIT test:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your primary care doctor's office will provide you a kit for home. Collect a sample of stool at home and mail it back to the lab to be tested. You will receive results after about 2 weeks from submitting the specimen. If the test result is abnormal, you will need to have a colonoscopy. You will need to repeat the stool test every 1-year. 	<p>3. Cologuard®:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your primary care doctor's office will place an order for a kit to be mailed to your home. Collect a sample of stool at home and mail it back to the lab to be tested. You will receive results after about 2 weeks from submitting the specimen. If the test result is abnormal, you will need to have a colonoscopy. You will need to repeat the stool test every 3 years.
What are the main benefits?		
<p>Schedule colonoscopy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A small number of people may be prevented from dying of colorectal cancer. Some cancers are found early, when it may be easier to treat. During the procedure, polyps can be removed. 	<p>FIT test:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can complete this testing quickly, within 2 weeks. A small number of people may be prevented from dying of colorectal cancer. You can collect the stool sample at home. No special preparation is needed for this test. 	<p>Cologuard®:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can complete this testing quickly, within 2 weeks. A small number of people may be prevented from dying of colorectal cancer. You can collect the stool sample at home. No special preparation is needed for this test.
What are the main harms or downsides?		
<p>Schedule colonoscopy :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You may find cancer or a polyp at a later stage because of current delays in booking routine colonoscopies. Some people have difficulty with the colonoscopy preparation. Small chance of serious complications such as a tear in the colon, bleeding or infection that may require hospitalization. 	<p>FIT test:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You will need to collect and mail the specimen to the hospital laboratory in a timely manner. Instructions are provided. If the test result is abnormal, you will need to have a colonoscopy. (Colonoscopy will be expedited and will be completed within 90 days). 	<p>Cologuard®:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You will need to collect and mail the specimen to the Exact Sciences Company in a timely manner. Instructions are provided. If the test result is abnormal, you will need to have a colonoscopy. (Colonoscopy will be expedited and will be completed within 90 days).

People make different choices based on their situation and goals.

Here are some quotes from our patients discussing choices they have made:

“Given my family history of colon cancer, my doctor recommended that I get a colonoscopy as my screening test.”

“I didn’t know about the stool tests—that seems like an easier way to test and get the results right away.”

“I like the option of doing the Cologuard® test and if everything checks out OK, I don’t have to do another test for 3 years.”

More about stool-based tests

Stool-based tests involve checking your stool for tiny amounts of blood or abnormal DNA, which could be signs of colorectal cancer.

You can get an order for an at-home stool test from your doctor. These tests are mailed to you, can be done in your home, and mailed back either to the hospital or the testing laboratory. You will receive notification from your doctor’s office about your results.

There are different types of stool-based tests:

- **Fecal immunochemical test (FIT).** This test checks for blood in the stool. The test kit contains the things that you need for collecting small samples of stool. This test needs to be done every year.
- **Stool DNA test (FIT-DNA/Cologuard®).** This test checks the stool for blood and genetic changes in DNA that could be signs of cancer. The test kit has a container for collecting an entire bowel movement. This test needs to be done every 3 years.

Are stool-based tests as good as colonoscopy at finding colon cancer?

For routine screening, stool-based tests are about as good as colonoscopy as long as you do the stool-based tests on the recommended schedule and follow-up with colonoscopy for any abnormal result.

Do the stool-based tests work for patients who have had prior polyps?

Studies suggest that colonoscopy is a better cancer screening test for patients with prior polyps to find new polyps as well as cancer.

How long does it take to get my results?

The sooner you complete your test, the sooner you will get results. You can expect results in your mail or via Patient Gateway about 2 weeks after you return it.

Are these tests covered by insurance?

Yes, these tests are covered by insurance when done for colon cancer screening purposes.