

Cancer Screening

What is a screening test?

A screening test can find diseases before you have symptoms or feel sick. Screening for certain cancers when you are at the right age can sometimes lead to better treatment, which may lower your chances of dying from the disease.

What are some common screening tests for cancer?

Pap smears look for signs of cervical cancer. Mammograms test for breast cancer. Colon cancer can be found using a colonoscopy test or by testing your stool to see if it has blood in it. Low-dose computed tomography (CT scan for short) is used to find lung cancer in smokers. The screening test for prostate cancer is called a prostate-specific antigen test.

Should I ever stop getting screened for cancer?

Cancer screening tests can save lives but can also cause harm. As you get older, screening tests may become more risky and can lead to more testing with bad side effects. Also, screening tests are not always accurate. They can cause you to worry and have procedures that are not needed, like biopsies and surgery. In time, your doctor may recommend that you not be screened for cancer anymore.

How do I know when I should stop getting screened?

Talk to your doctor. Before you make a decision, you should talk about your medical history, overall health, and personal wishes. Think about if you want to get further testing and treatment if you might have cancer.

Women who are 65 years and older who have had regular, normal Pap smears for the past 10 years can usually stop. Many patients older than 75 years, and almost all patients 85 years and older do not need to be screened for breast or colon cancers because these cancers grow slowly and are unlikely to harm patients of this age.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/cancer/diagnosis-tests.html>

American Cancer Society

<http://www.cancer.org/healthy/findcancerearly/cancerscreeningguidelines/index>

Electronic Preventive Services Selector

<http://epss.ahrq.gov/ePSS/search.jsp>

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force

<http://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/Tools/ConsumerInfo/Index/information-for-consumers>

April 2016

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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