



Colorectal Cancer Facts:
Early Screening Saves Lives and Prevents Cancer
In New Mexico

- { Colorectal cancer is the **fourth most frequently diagnosed cancer** in the United States. The American Cancer Society estimates that there will be 147,500 new cases diagnosed in 2003, including 800 in New Mexico.
- { Colorectal cancer is the **second leading cause of cancer death** in the United States. The American Cancer Society estimates that there will be 57,100 colorectal cancer deaths in 2003, including 300 in New Mexico.
- { The strongest **risk factors** for colorectal cancer include increasing age; family or personal history of colorectal cancer or polyps (pre-cancerous growths); hereditary conditions; personal history of ovarian, endometrial or breast cancer; and inflammatory bowel disease.
- { Colorectal cancer develops slowly in most people. The disease begins with **changes in the cells that line the colon - caused by complex interactions between the environment** (what we eat and how we live) **and genetics** (the instructions our cells carry that might make them more or less vulnerable to the environment). These cellular changes can lead to the formation of a growth called a polyp. Further changes within the polyp can transform it into cancer that can spread into other tissues and organs. But this transformation occurs slowly, over an estimated 10 to 15 years.
- { The slow transformation of a polyp into a cancer is why regular screening can actually **prevent colorectal cancer**. Screening saves lives by finding and removing abnormal polyps before they transform into invasive cancer. Colorectal cancer screening can also find cancer early when it is most responsive to treatment.
- { **Survival** depends upon the cancer stage (spread) at diagnosis. Patients with cancers that are confined to the inner lining of the colon can be cured with surgery and over 80% will still be alive after 5 years. However, if cancer has already spread throughout the body by the time of diagnosis, 5-year survival is only about 30%.
- { **Screening** for cancer is testing people to detect cancer at an early stage before it causes any symptoms or to detect pre-cancerous growths (polyps).
- { **Screening tests** include fecal occult blood testing (coating special cards with stool samples to look for hidden bleeding); barium enema (an x-ray test looking at the entire column);

flexible sigmoidoscopy (a lighted tube that looks at the lower 2 feet of the colon); and colonoscopy (a longer lighted tube that looks at the entire colon).

- { **Colonoscopy** can find polyps or cancers throughout the entire colon. Polyps can also be completely removed with this procedure. Any time there is an abnormal fecal occult blood test, barium enema, or flexible sigmoidoscopy, the patient needs to undergo a colonoscopy.
- { Studies have shown that completing the **fecal occult blood test** every year or every other year can decrease the chance of dying from colorectal cancer by 15% to 33%, when abnormal results are followed up with colonoscopy. The combination of these tests can decrease the chance of ever developing colorectal cancer by about 20%.
- { Consensus **screening recommendations** from professional organizations are for annual fecal occult blood testing and/or a flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years. The American College of Gastroenterology and the American Cancer Society also recommend screening with colonoscopy.
- { The **number of new cases and deaths** from colorectal cancer remains high because most adults are not undergoing screening tests. Unfortunately, this also means that they are being diagnosed at an advanced stage--when cancer has spread--when it is much more difficult to cure. In **New Mexico**, recent statistics show that only 40% of cancers were detected at an early stage. The Centers for Disease Control surveyed adults 50 and older about their colorectal cancer screening history. In 2001, only 45% of New Mexican adults were considered to be current on their screening--based on having recently undergone testing with either a fecal occult blood test, sigmoidoscopy, or colonoscopy.