

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT CANCER SCREENING



Canadian Cancer Society Société canadienne du cancer

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WHAT IS CANCER SCREENING?

Screening tests help to find some types of cancer early, before you have any symptoms. Some screening tests can even help prevent cancer by finding changes in your body that would become cancer if they were left untreated. Once you reach a certain age, these tests are recommended even if you have no signs or symptoms. No screening test is 100% accurate but a good screening test is one that results in a decrease in death rates in people with cancer.

Currently in PEI, there are screening programs in place or in development for breast, cervical, and colon cancer.

WHY AREN'T THERE SCREENING PROGRAMS FOR OTHER TYPES OF CANCER?

Not all tests have been proven effective for screening use. For example, some tests haven't been shown to improve your chance of survival; you just end up knowing you have cancer for longer. Other tests are not accurate enough and may tell you that you have cancer when you don't (false-positive) or tell you that you don't have cancer when you do (false-negative).

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF SCREENING?

- Prevention or earlier detection of cancer: In most cases, the earlier a cancer is detected, the better your chance of survival. Early detection may also mean less treatment and less time spent recovering. Some screening, such as cervical and colon, can actually prevent cancer from happening in the first place.
- Reducing the anxiety of "not knowing": Many people prefer to have 'check-ups', just like a physical exam with your family doctor.

ARE THERE RISKS OF SCREENING?

- False positive results: When test results suggest cancer even though cancer is not present. False positives can result in anxiety, stress and possibly painful and unnecessary tests to rule out cancer (that is, to make sure you don't have cancer when the screening test has suggested you might).
- False negative results: When cancer is not detected by the test even though it is present. False negative results may cause you or your physician to ignore other symptoms that indicate the presence of cancer, causing a delay in diagnosis and treatment.
- Over-diagnosis. Some cancers would not necessarily lead to death or decreased quality of life. For example, some prostate cancers never become clinically apparent, meaning that they do not cause any symptoms, nor do they affect life expectancy or quality of life. Men with these tumours may not ever develop symptoms or need treatment for cancer.
- Increased exposure to harmful procedures, for example very low doses of radiation from x-ray tests.

COLON CANCER

HOW DO I GET SCREENED FOR COLON CANCER?

The FOBT, or fecal occult blood test, is a simple test that you can perform yourself at home and is currently the recommended screening test in Canada for people of average risk. It tests for traces of blood in your stool after you have a bowel movement, which may be a sign of colon cancer. The FOBT requires bowel movements from 3 separate days.

The PEI Colorectal Screening Program is currently in development and, once island-wide, FOBT kits will be available in multiple sites. Right now, you can request an FOBT kit from your doctor or, if you don't have a doctor, by calling the PEI Colorectal Screening Program at 1-888-561-2233.

Following the instructions in the FOBT kit, collect your samples over 3 separate days and return the completed kit to your doctor's office or local Island hospital.

FOBT IS RECOMMENDED FOR ANYONE WHO:

- is over the age of 50
- has no family history and is not experiencing signs or symptoms of colorectal cancer
- does not suffer from inflammatory bowel disease (e.g.: Crohn's or Ulcerative Colitis)

IF YOU ARE AT AN INCREASED RISK FOR COLON CANCER, CONTACT YOUR DOCTOR TO DISCUSS YOUR SCREENING OPTIONS.

You may be at an increased risk if you have:

- a family history of colon cancer
- polyps (small growths on the inner wall of the colon and rectum)
- familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP) or hereditary nonpolyposis colon cancer (HNPCC)
- inflammatory bowel disease (ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease)

IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING ANY OF THE FOLLOWING SYMPTOMS SEE YOUR DOCTOR RIGHT AWAY

- a change in bowel movements
- blood in your stool
- long standing diarrhea, constipation or a feeling that your bowel does not empty completely
- weight loss, fatigue
- vomiting

HOW WILL I GET MY TEST RESULTS?

Currently, FOBT results are sent in the mail to your doctor. Once the PEI Colorectal Screening Program is running island-wide, results will also be mailed to individuals who complete the FOBT kit. The time it takes for processing will vary and may depend on current test volume.

WHAT IF MY TEST RESULTS ARE POSITIVE?

A positive FOBT requires follow up and does not necessarily mean you have cancer. Only about 10% of people with a positive FOBT are found to have cancer during follow up. Follow up usually includes colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF COLON SCREENING BY FOBT?

Taking the FOBT every two years can significantly reduce your chances of developing colon cancer. It can identify polyps before they become cancerous and can detect cancer before there are any symptoms. If you do have colon cancer and it is caught early, there is a 90% chance that the cancer can be cured.

CERVICAL CANCER

HOW DO I GET SCREENED FOR CERVICAL CANCER?

A Pap test is an examination of your cervix by a doctor or nurse. During the examination, they will gently take a sample of cells with a small, soft brush. Although it can be uncomfortable, it should not be painful.

Make an appointment with your doctor or at the Pap Screening Clinic in Cornwall (368-2010 or toll-free 1-866-818-7277). The Pap Screening Clinic is available to women between the ages of 18 and 69 who have not had a Pap test within the past two years.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF CERVICAL SCREENING BY PAP TEST?

Regular pap tests can detect changes or abnormalities in the cells of the cervix before cancer develops. Early detection allows for treatment of pre-cancerous cells. More than 90% of cervical cancer can be prevented by regular screening with the Pap test. Most cases of cervical cancer occur in women not regularly screened. You will have no symptoms to let you know you need a Pap test.

WHO SHOULD HAVE A PAP TEST?

You should have regular Pap tests as soon as you become sexually active or you reach the age of 18. You should continue to have regular Pap tests every one to two years, even if you are no longer sexually active or are past child-bearing age.

Even if you have had a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus), you may still need regular Pap tests. A woman whose cervix is not completely removed, or a woman who has had abnormal results on previous Pap test, should continue to have regular Pap tests after a hysterectomy. Talk to your doctor about what is right for you.

SHOULD I HAVE A PAP TEST IF I'VE RECEIVED THE HPV VACCINE?

Yes, the HPV Vaccine is not 100% effective and does not protect against all types of HPV. A Pap test is still recommended.

HOW WILL I GET MY TEST RESULTS?

Test results will be sent to your doctor or to the Pap Screening Clinic. Although they will contact you if there is an abnormal result, you may choose to contact them directly to confirm.

WHAT IF MY TEST RESULTS ARE ABNORMAL?

Abnormal test results do not mean you have cancer. They may be followed up by repeat Pap tests or by a colposcopy.

BREAST CANCER

HOW DO I GET SCREENED FOR BREAST CANCER?

It is an x-ray of your breasts which provides a picture of the breast tissue. Mammogram is currently the recommended screening test in Canada and it is done by briefly compressing the breast. You may feel some discomfort, but only for a few seconds. Two x-rays are taken of each breast – one from the side and one from the top. Mammograms are offered at Breast Screening Clinics at Prince County Hospital and at Queen Elizabeth Hospital.

You do not need a doctor's referral to come to a Breast Screening Clinic. Appointments are necessary and can be made by calling P.E.I. Breast Screening Program: Toll free @ 1-888-592-9888

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BREAST SCREENING BY MAMMOGRAM?

Early detection of breast cancer greatly improves a person's chance of survival. When breast cancer is caught in its earliest stages, the five-year survival rate for women under the age of 70 is 90%. Regular screening has been proven effective in detecting cancer and reducing mortality in women ages 50-70.

WHO SHOULD HAVE A MAMMOGRAM?

Women between the ages of 50 and 69 are currently recommended to have a mammogram every two years. If you are between 40 and 49 and are at average risk of breast cancer, talk to your doctor about the benefits and risks of screening with mammography. Having a mammogram is especially important if your family (mother, sister, father or daughter) has a history of breast cancer.

ON P.E.I., BREAST SCREENING CLINICS ARE AVAILABLE TO WOMEN BETWEEN THE AGES OF 40-75 WHO:

- have no symptoms, such as a breast lump, puckery skin, a nipple discharge or rash
- have not had a mammogram in the last 12 months
- do not have breast implants
- have never had breast cancer

If you do have any of the conditions above, talk to your doctor about the screening that is right for you.

HOW WILL I GET MY TEST RESULTS?

Within a few weeks after your visit to a Breast Screening Clinic, you will receive your results in the mail. Your family doctor will also receive your results and keep them in your health record.

WHAT IF MY TEST RESULTS ARE POSITIVE?

A positive result does not mean that you have cancer. Sometimes, mammograms can produce "false positives". These are results that tell you that you need to follow up with more tests, but upon further investigation, turn out to be normal. All positive results require follow up testing which may include a more detailed diagnostic mammogram or a biopsy to examine breast tissue.

ARE THERE ANY RESOURCES TO HELP ME LEARN MORE AND DECIDE WHAT'S RIGHT FOR ME?

The best resource is your health care team. Talk with them. Contact the provincial screening programs.

Additional resources include:

- The Canadian Cancer Society
Cancer Information Service 1-888-939-3333 www.cancer.ca
- Cancer Screening: Benefits and Limitations (a brochure by The Canadian Partnership Against Cancer, 2009, www.partnershipagainstcancer.ca)
- Information on Mammography for Women Aged 40 and Older: A Decision Aid for Breast Cancer Screening in Canada (a booklet by The Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009)
- Testing for Cancer: My Options My Choice (a booklet by The Centre for Effective Practice, Cancer Care Ontario and The Canadian Cancer Society, Ontario Division, 2009, www.cancer.ca/ontario/Publications)



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