

# AgePage

## Cancer Facts for People Over 50

Cancer strikes people of all ages, but you are more likely to get cancer as you get older, even if no one in your family has ever had cancer. The good news is that cases of cancer and death rates are going down. That means that no matter what your age, the chances of surviving cancer are better today than ever before.

### What Is Cancer?

Cancer begins when cells in a part of the body become abnormal. These cells make more and more abnormal cells forming a mass of tissue called a growth or a cancerous (malignant) tumor. Cancer usually starts in one part of the body. But, if the cancer tumor gets bigger, it can damage nearby tissues and organs. Cancer cells also can break away and spread to other parts of the body (this is called metastatic cancer).

When cancer is found early, treatment is more likely to work. Early treatment can shrink or destroy the cancer tumor and stop it from growing and spreading. Getting regular checkups and knowing the symptoms of cancer can be helpful for finding some cancers early.

### What Symptoms Should I Watch For?

Cancer can cause many different symptoms. Here are some things to watch for:

- ◆ A thickening or lump in the body, for example a lump in the breast may be a sign of breast cancer
- ◆ Weight gain or loss with no known reason
- ◆ Feeling weak or very tired
- ◆ Unusual bleeding or discharge
- ◆ A sore that does not heal
- ◆ Hoarseness or a cough that does not go away
- ◆ Changes in bowel or bladder habits
- ◆ Discomfort after eating
- ◆ A hard time swallowing

Most often, these symptoms are not due to cancer. They may be caused by non-cancerous (benign) tumors or other problems. If you are having any of these symptoms or other changes in

your health, you should see a doctor as soon as possible.

Don't wait to feel pain. In its early stages, cancer usually doesn't cause pain.

## What Regular Tests Should I Have?

Checking for cancer when you don't have symptoms is called screening. Screening may involve a physical exam, lab tests, or tests to look at internal organs.

Medicare covers a number of screening tests for cancer. For more information, call the Medicare toll-free help-line at 1-800-633-4227 or visit their website at [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov).

Before recommending a screening test, your doctor will look at your age, past medical problems, family medical problems, general health, and lifestyle. Talk with your doctor about your concerns or questions about cancer screening so that you know what to expect from the tests. It is important to understand the possible benefits and harm of screening tests before deciding what might be best for you.

Here is a list of screening tests, by cancer type, to consider if you are 50 or older:

### Breast Cancer

- ◆ **Clinical Breast Exam.** During a clinical breast exam, a doctor or other healthcare professional checks the breasts and underarms for lumps or other changes that could be a sign of breast cancer.
- ◆ **Mammogram.** A special x-ray of the breast often can find cancers too small for a woman or her doctor to feel. A woman's risk of breast cancer goes up as she gets older. Talk to your doctor about what may be the right schedule for you.

### Cervical and Other Women's Cancers

- ◆ **Pap Test.** During a Pap test, the doctor gently scrapes cells from the cervix (the lower part of the uterus or womb) and vagina. The cells are sent to a lab to see if they are abnormal. The National Cancer Institute recommends that all women have a Pap test at least once every 3 years. If you are age 65 or older, talk with your doctor to find out if you still need to get a Pap test. Cervical cancer is caused by a

virus called the human papilloma virus (HPV), which can stay in the body for many years.

- ◆ ***Pelvic Exam.*** The doctor checks the uterus, vagina, ovaries, and rectum for any changes in shape or size. During a pelvic exam, an instrument called a speculum is used to look into the vagina so that the upper part of the vagina and the cervix can be seen.

## **Colorectal Cancer**

- ◆ ***Sigmoidoscopy.*** The doctor uses a thin, flexible tube with a light to look inside the lower part of the colon and rectum for growths or abnormal areas. Studies show that sigmoidoscopy, done once every 5 years, can save lives.
- ◆ ***Colonoscopy.*** Most doctors recommend a colonoscopy every 10 years. It is like a sigmoidoscopy except that it looks at the whole colon. Serious complications from colonoscopies, like bleeding, are rare but may occur more often in older people. Researchers are studying if a virtual colonoscopy or colonography, which takes pictures using an x-ray, might be a possible alternative to a traditional colonoscopy.

- ◆ ***Fecal Occult Blood Test.*** Stool samples are put on special cards and sent to a lab. In the lab, they are tested to see if there is occult (hidden) blood, which can be a sign of cancer. Studies show that if you have a fecal occult blood test every 1 or 2 years between the ages of 50 and 80, you can lower your chance of dying from colorectal cancer. Most cases of colorectal cancer are diagnosed in people over age 50.

## **Mouth and Throat Cancers**

- ◆ ***Oral Exams.*** To detect cancer early, doctors and dentists look at the lips, tongue, mouth, and throat to see if there are any abnormal changes.

## **Prostate Cancer**

Researchers are working to find the best screening test for prostate cancer. Here are two tests that doctors sometimes use for detecting prostate cancer:

- ◆ ***Digital Rectal Exam.*** The doctor puts a gloved finger into the rectum and feels the prostate through the wall of the rectum. If the doctor feels hard or lumpy areas, they may be a sign of cancer. Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in American men, especially men over age 65.

- ◆ ***Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) Test.*** This test measures the amount of PSA in the blood. If the PSA level is higher than average, it may mean that prostate cancer cells are present. PSA levels also may be high in men who have other prostate problems.

## **Skin Cancer**

- ◆ ***Skin Exams.*** These are routine exams of the skin that can help find skin cancer early.

## **Screening Test Results**

If a screening test does show a growth or abnormal change, it doesn't always mean that you have cancer. You may need more tests. A biopsy is the best way to know whether the problem is cancer. In a biopsy, a small piece of tissue is taken from the abnormal area and looked at under a microscope to check for cancer cells. If tests show you have cancer, you and your doctor should discuss a treatment plan as soon as possible.

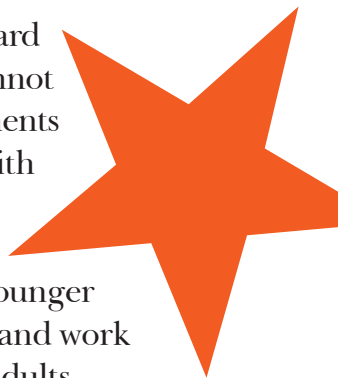
## **How Is Cancer Treated?**

There are a number of cancer treatments. These include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy (anti-cancer drugs), and biological

therapy for some cancers. People with cancer often see different specialists like a medical oncologist (specialist in cancer treatment), a surgeon, and a radiation oncologist (specialist in radiation therapy). The doctor may talk with you about using one type of treatment alone or two or more treatments together. Your choice of treatment depends on the type of cancer you have, including where it is in the body and how much it has grown and spread (its stage). You and your doctor will also take into account your overall health and any other conditions.

You may have heard that older people cannot have the same treatments as younger people with cancer. But many studies show that treatments used in younger adults are often safe and work just as well in older adults.

Before starting treatment, you may want to get a second opinion. This is when another doctor goes over your diagnosis and treatment plan. Some insurance companies require a second opinion; others may pay for a second opinion if you ask for one.



Some cancer patients take part in studies of new treatments. These studies—called clinical trials—are meant to find out if new treatments are safe and whether they work as well as or better than other treatments. If you are a cancer patient and interested in taking part in a clinical trial, talk with your doctor. You can find out about current clinical trials for cancer from the National Cancer Institute’s Cancer Information Service. See “For More Information” on page 11.

## Can Cancer Be Prevented?

Experts think that cancer may often be linked to things we can control, especially use of tobacco and what we eat and drink. Having a lot of contact with some chemicals, metals, or pesticides (weed killers and insect killers) can also make your risk of cancer higher. You can lower your risk of cancer in several ways:

◆ **Do not use tobacco products.** Tobacco causes cancer. In fact, smoking tobacco, using smokeless tobacco, and passive smoking (regularly breathing other people’s tobacco smoke) cause a third of all cancer deaths in the United States each year.

- ◆ **Avoid sunburns.** Too much ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun and from other sources—such as sunlamps and tanning booths—can damage your skin and cause skin cancer.
- ◆ **Eat right.** Eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day. Also cut down on fatty foods and eat plenty of fiber.
- ◆ **Keep your weight down.** People who are very overweight are more likely to get cancers of the prostate, pancreas, uterus, colon, and ovary. Older women who are overweight are more likely to develop breast cancer.
- ◆ **Stay active.** Studies show that exercise can help lower your chance of getting breast and colon cancer and perhaps other cancers, too. The National Institute on Aging’s **Go4Life**<sup>®</sup> campaign ([www.nia.nih.gov/Go4Life](http://www.nia.nih.gov/Go4Life)) has more information on exercise for people age 50 and older.
- ◆ **If you drink alcohol, do not have more than 1 or 2 drinks a day.** Drinking large amounts of alcohol raises the risk of cancers of the mouth, throat, esophagus, and larynx. People who smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol have an especially high risk of getting these cancers.

◆ **Follow work and safety rules to avoid dangerous contact with materials that cause cancer.** Talk with your boss or building manager about any concerns you have about your work environment and if you think you come in contact with dangerous materials.

## For More Information

The Cancer Information Service (CIS), a program of the National Cancer Institute at NIH, can provide accurate, up-to-date information about cancer. Information specialists can answer your questions in English and Spanish. The number is toll-free and easy to remember: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237).

You can get answers to your questions online through the CIS instant messaging service on the National Cancer Institute website at [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov). Click on “LiveHelp online chat.”

Here is another helpful resources:

## National Library of Medicine

MedlinePlus

[www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov)

For more information about health and aging, contact:

## National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)

[www.nia.nih.gov/espanol](http://www.nia.nih.gov/espanol)

To sign up for regular email alerts about new publications and other information from the NIA, go to [www.nia.nih.gov/health](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health).

Visit [www.nihseniorhealth.gov](http://www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health and wellness information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to make the type larger.



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