

# Colon Cancer Awareness & Prevention

By: Lisa Franzen-Castle, RD, PhD, Nutrition Specialist  
UNL Panhandle Research & Extension Center  
Author E-mail: lfranzen2@unl.edu

Colon Cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death in the country and Nebraska has one of the highest incidences of death rates from colorectal cancer in the United States. Individuals age 50 and older make up more than 90% of Nebraska's nearly 1,000 annual colon cancer diagnoses. Colon cancer is an equal opportunity diagnosis. Both men and women of all racial and ethnic groups are at risk for colon cancer, but it occurs more frequently in people who are obese. There are several ways to help reduce your risk and prevent colon cancer. Many of these strategies focus on healthy lifestyle practices such as eating habits, limiting alcohol, not smoking, and being physically active.



## How to Reduce your Risk:

**Eat healthy.** One way to lower your risk is to eat a diet rich in fruits and vegetables and whole grains from breads, cereals, and pastas. The *2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* stress limiting refined carbohydrates (starches), such as pastries, sweetened cereals, and other high-sugar foods.



**Focus on folate.** Folate is a B vitamin that helps produce and maintain new cells. It may also help prevent changes to DNA that may lead to cancer.



Eat foods with folate more often, such as leafy green vegetables like spinach and turnip greens, fruits such as citrus fruits and 100% juices, and dried beans and peas.

**Limit alcohol.** If alcohol is consumed, it should be done in moderation. According to the *2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, up to one drink per day for women and two drinks per day for men, and only by adults of legal drinking age. One drink is defined as 12 oz. of regular beer, 5 oz. of wine, or 1.5 oz. of 80 proof distilled spirits.



**Toss tobacco.** Based on several studies of groups of people followed over many years, smoking appears to double the risk of colon cancers. If you use tobacco, quit as soon as possible. If you do not use tobacco, do not start. Visit [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org) and [www.smokefree.gov](http://www.smokefree.gov) for more information and resources on quitting.



**Be active.** *The American Cancer Society* recommends that adults get at least 30 minutes of moderate or vigorous physical activity most days of the week. You can even break it up into 10-minute segments throughout the day. Moderate exercise such as walking, gardening, or climbing steps may help reduce your risk. Examples of vigorous activity include jogging or running, fast bicycling, circuit weight training, aerobic dance, martial arts, jumping rope, or swimming.



## Possible symptoms of colon cancer may include:

- Blood in or on the stool
- A change in bowel habits
- General, unexplained stomach discomfort
- Frequent gas, pains, or indigestion
- Unexplained weight loss
- Chronic fatigue

## Risk Factors:

- Eating a low-fiber, high fat diet
- Being overweight
- Smoking
- An inactive lifestyle
- Certain hereditary conditions, such as the tendency to have many colon polyps
- A family history of colon cancer, especially parents or siblings

**Know how. Know now.**

If you are older than 50, experiencing symptoms, or are at higher risk, talk to your physician about being screened for colon cancer. Recommended screening tests include:

- Sigmoidoscopy every five years
- Colonoscopy annually if you have a first-degree relative with a history of colorectal cancer or every 10 years if the hereditary risk factor does not apply
- Double contrast barium enema every 5 to 10 years

#### **Early detection is key:**

- If detected early, 90% of colon cancer cases are curable. However, because there may be no symptoms, many do not get checked.
- The Nebraska Colon Cancer Screening Program titled “*Stay in the Game,*” states that your risk of having colon cancer is 1 in 19. The Program urges individuals to take a simple at-home test using a free test kit available from the Panhandle Cancer Coalition and the Nebraska Colon Cancer Screening Program.
- The Colon Cancer distribution and awareness campaign is for *Nebraska* residents. Funding for this program is from the Nebraska Colon Cancer Program through the Office of Women’s and Men’s Health at the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

#### **How to get a free test kit:**

- **Scotts Bluff County residents:** If you are a Nebraska resident in Scotts Bluff County and between the ages of 50 and 75 years old, contact Martha Stricker, RN, BSN, Nurse Manager - Community Health at (308) 630-1559 or [strickm@rwmc.net](mailto:strickm@rwmc.net).
- **Nebraska Panhandle residents outside Scotts Bluff County:** If you are 50 or older, having symptoms, or concerned about risk factors contact Kelly Dean, RN, BSN who works as a Public Health Nurse for Panhandle Public Health District (PPHD) at (308) 262-2217 or [kdean@pphd.org](mailto:kdean@pphd.org).
- **Nebraska residents outside of the Panhandle:** Those who are over 50 years of age and older and meet income guidelines are eligible to fill out the Nebraska Colon Cancer Screening Enrollment Form and mail it in. <http://www.hhs.state.ne.us/crc/docs/CRCEnrollment-StayInGame.pdf>

#### **Services Provided by Nebraska Colon Cancer Screening Program** (free or low-cost screening)

- Review of health history and education about colon and rectal cancer screening.
- Fecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT) annually if determined to be the best screening test based on your health history.
- Colonoscopy as initial screening test if determined to be the best screening test based on your health history.
- Colonoscopy following a positive Fecal Occult Blood Test

**If you are already enrolled in *Every Woman Matters*:** You will receive information about the Nebraska Colon Cancer Screening Program with your eligibility notification letter.

**If you are not enrolled in *Every Woman Matters* but would like to receive information:** Please visit the *Every Woman Matters* page (<http://www.hhs.state.ne.us/hew/owh/ewm/>) or contact them at 800-532-2227.

You can lower your risk of developing colon cancer by managing the risk factors that you can control, like diet and physical activity. Make your health a priority and make some permanent lifestyle changes. For more information, resources, and recipes check out [www.food.unl.edu](http://www.food.unl.edu).

#### **Sources:**

1. American Cancer Society (ACS). ACS Guidelines on Nutrition and Physical Activity for Cancer Prevention. 2011. [www.cancer.org/Healthy/EatHealthyGetActive/ACSGuidelineonNutritionPhysicalActivityforCancerPrevention/index](http://www.cancer.org/Healthy/EatHealthyGetActive/ACSGuidelineonNutritionPhysicalActivityforCancerPrevention/index)
2. World Health Organization (WHO). Tobacco Free Initiative, Colon. 2011. [www.who.int/tobacco/research/cancer/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/tobacco/research/cancer/en/index.html)
3. Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (NDHHS). Nebraska Colon Cancer Screening Program. 2011. <http://www.hhs.state.ne.us/crc/#How>
4. National Institutes of Health (NIH). Fact Sheet. Folate: What is it? 2009. <http://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/folate/>
5. United States Department of Agriculture. Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010. [www.cnpp.usda.gov/DGAs2010-PolicyDocument.htm](http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/DGAs2010-PolicyDocument.htm)

**Updated:** March 2011

**This Newsletter has been peer reviewed.**