



# Honor the Gift *of Health*

GET TESTED FOR COLON CANCER



American Indian  
Cancer Foundation.

“I tell the people I doctor to get tested for colon cancer. I tell them those polyps are like squatters, and if you don’t take them out they can take over.”

– Herb Sam, Anishinaabe

## There was No Indian Word for Cancer

For many years, no American Indian language had a word for cancer. This is why many elders think that cancer is a new cause of pain and suffering. Some tribes have begun to call cancer asabikeshi’yaapinewin (spider illness). Cancer is now the most common reason elders make their spirit journey before their time. It is even more common than heart disease.

Many American Indians are afraid of cancer. They do not understand it. Some believe it is the result of breaking taboos. Many see it as a death sentence. Some even believe that just talking about cancer will give them the disease. These beliefs can lead Indian people to avoid medical tests that can find cancer early and save their lives.

When elders avoid cancer tests, they hurt not only themselves but their families and communities. Their wisdom is lost too soon.



## Along Came a Spider

I want to share with you a dream. In this dream a great spider came to hurt the people of my tribe. One by one, our elders and even our young would be bitten. Some would make their spirit journey, leaving their families before their natural time. No matter what we tried, we could not rid our people of this spider.

As time went on, we came to see that the spider was also attacking non-Indian people. But they could not get rid of the spider either. As my dream went on our leaders and the non-Indian leaders came to see that only by working together could we take on this evil being that was leaving so many families without their elders.

I feel this spider stands for cancer.

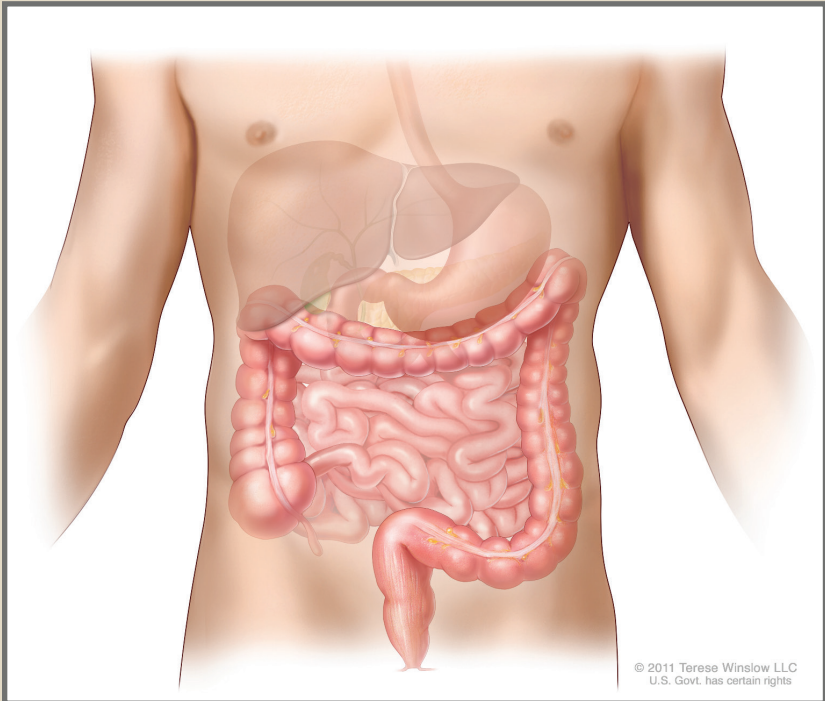
– Anishinaabe Healer

# What is Cancer?

The body is made up of many cells. Each cell has a job. Muscle cells pull against each other to make you move. Skin cells protect your body. Healthy cells know what to do and where they belong.

Cancer starts when cells forget their jobs and grow out of control. They go to the wrong parts of the body and cause damage and pain.

When cancer is found early, before it moves to other parts of the body, people can be treated and live long lives. If the cancer has spread, it can be hard to treat.



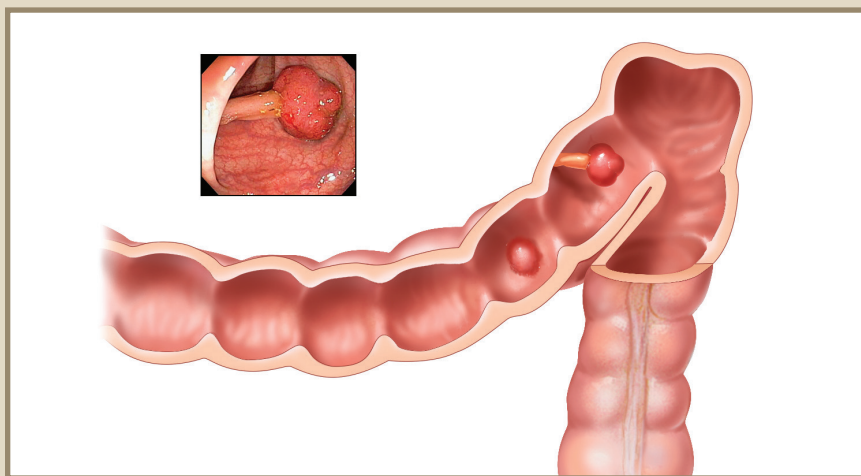
Tiwahenitawa ob Wasagiciya Inazin  
Stay strong for your family.

# Education

## What is Colorectal Cancer?

Colorectal cancer is cancer of the large bowel (colon) or the rectum. Often called just colon cancer, it is one of the most common cancers in American Indian people. Most colon cancer starts with a polyp. Polyps are small growths found in the colon. They are very common. Half of us will have at least one polyp before we are 70 years old.

Only 1 in 10 polyps turn into cancer. This can take 8 to 15 years to happen. The good news is that doctors can take these out painlessly without surgery before they turn into cancer.



I had a friend whose father died of colon cancer at a young age. When my friend was found to have colon cancer at age 38, I wondered if he could have prevented his cancer through early testing. I promised myself I would not let this happen to me or my family.

When I had my first colonoscopy, polyps were found and removed. It was painless and I am thankful I took these simple steps to prevent cancer from growing in my own body.

*- Chuck Walt, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa*



## **DID YOU KNOW?** At least **1** in every **15** Northern Plains Indians will have colon or rectal cancer during their life.

Taking polyps out can prevent colon cancer. Detecting colon cancer early makes it easy to cure. Unfortunately, only one out of four Native people get screened, and all too often we find late cancers which are hard to survive. I have heard all of the reasons people put screening off. I tell my patients that screening is like wearing your seatbelt. You might never have an accident, but what if you do?

*- David Perdue, MD, Chickasaw*



### **Colon Cancer Starts Quietly, With No Warning**

It is common for people to say, “Why should I be tested for cancer? I feel fine.” But colon cancer rarely causes symptoms (warning signs) until it has grown and spread. The best time to be tested is when you are feeling fine. Once it begins to grow, symptoms of colon cancer can be:

- Problems moving your bowels, or a change in the way your bowels work
- Pain in the stomach (abdomen)
- Blood in the stool (usually tiny amounts too small to see)
- Shortness of breath or feeling tired from losing blood in the stool

Many other things besides cancer can cause these symptoms. But if you have them, you need to talk to your doctor right away.

# Prevention

## Colon Cancer is a Serious Problem for American Indians

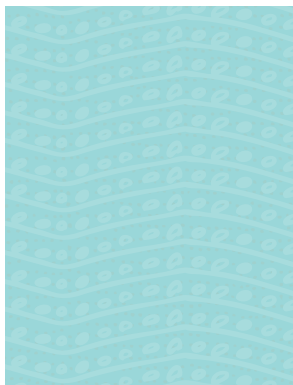
American Indians in the Northern Plains are at great risk for getting colon cancer. They are more likely to get colon cancer than non-Indians. The reason for this is not clear. Colon cancer is often found later in American Indians. It is harder to treat then and harder to cure.

### Risk Factors for Colon Cancer

You have a greater chance of getting colon cancer if you:

- Have a family member who has had colon cancer
- Don't eat enough fresh fruits and vegetables
- Eat too much red meat and animal fat (like lard).  
Eat too much processed meat (bologna, hot dogs, sandwich meats)
- Are overweight
- Don't get enough exercise
- Use of commercial tobacco
- Have diabetes
- Drink a lot of alcohol
- Don't get tested for colon cancer

**If you're 45 or older,  
you need to get tested  
for colorectal cancer.**





## ***One Indian Woman's Story***

My name is Carolyn Williams. I am Anishinaabe from White Earth. In May 2002 I learned I had colon cancer. I had no aches or pains, but a year before the cancer was found I was tired most of the time. I would sleep all day if my husband would let me, and all weekend, too. My doctor said I should get a colonoscopy. I asked people I worked with if anyone had gone through this. The answer I got was, "Yes, I know someone. They said this was the most embarrassing thing and it is painful." Twice my doctor set up the appointment and I canceled. I went the third time, in late 2003. By that time I had started passing blood clots.

During the colonoscopy, I didn't feel anything. I was not embarrassed. When I woke up I was told I had a six inch tumor and that I would need surgery as soon as possible.

I did not hear anything but the word cancer. I thought to myself, "What did I do wrong? How can I tell my family? My kids are too young to lose their Mom! I won't get to spoil my grandchildren! My husband needs me!"

I was scheduled for surgery within 7 days because the doctor was afraid that the tumor was pressing on other organs. During surgery they took 18 inches of my colon. Cancer was in my lymph nodes, and had spread to my pelvis and rectal area. When I woke up the doctor said, "Everything looks good. We got the tumor out." But I still had to travel 160 miles round trip many times for 6 months of chemotherapy and 33 radiation treatments.

I know my cancer may have been prevented if I had been tested earlier. I also know that if I had had the colonoscopy when my doctor first told me, I may not have needed chemotherapy and radiation. Everyone needs to know how important it is to get tested and that colonoscopies are not scary or painful. It is a lot easier and a lot better than going through treatment for colon cancer.

I recently saw my doctor to be rechecked and everything looks good. I have been cancer free 6 years. This makes me one of the lucky ones for my stage of cancer. Thank you, God, and everyone who prayed for me. I will always be an advocate for colon cancer screening.

*Miigwech, Carolyn Williams*

# A Healthy Way of Life

## American Cancer Society Recommendations for Colorectal Cancer Early Detection

### People at average risk

The American Cancer Society believes that preventing colorectal cancer (and not just finding it early) should be a major reason for getting tested. Having polyps found and removed keeps some people from getting colorectal cancer. Tests that have the best chance of finding both polyps and cancer are preferred if these tests are available to you and you are willing to have them.

Starting at age 45, men and women at average risk for developing colorectal cancer should use one of the screening tests below.

### Tests that Find Polyps and Cancer

- Flexible sigmoidoscopy every 5 years\* or
- Colonoscopy every 10 years or
- Double-contrast barium enema every 5 years\* or
- CT colonography (virtual colonoscopy) every 5 years\*

### Tests that mainly find cancer

- Guaiac-based fecal occult blood test (gFOBT) every year\*\*\* or
- Fecal immunochemical test (FIT) every year\*\* or
- Stool DNA test every 3 years\*

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*\*Colonoscopy should be done if test results are positive.*

*\*\*Highly sensitive versions of these tests should be used with the take-home multiple sample method. A gFOBT or FIT done during a digital rectal exam in the doctor's office is not enough for screening.*





## ***Colonoscopy***

This test looks at the entire large bowel (colon) for polyps and cancer. Before the test, the colon must be emptied. Your doctor or nurse will tell you how to do that. During the test you will be given one medicine to help you relax and another to reduce cramping. These medicines will make you sleepy. You may not remember the test, and you will need someone to drive you home. If your doctor sees a polyp, it can be removed without pain during the test.

You should not be embarrassed by this test. The doctor has done many colonoscopies. People who don't have any polyps and do not have a family history only need to do this test once every 10 years. If a polyp is found, you will need to do the test more often.

## ***Testing the Stool for Blood***

Colon cancer and large polyps can weep tiny amounts of blood into your stool. You can't see this blood but there are tests that can find it. Your doctor or nurse will give you a kit to use at home. They will tell you what you need to do. Testing stool from a rectal exam in the clinic is not accurate.

When you are done with the take home test, return it to the clinic. If blood is found it does not mean you have colon cancer. It does mean your doctor will order a colonoscopy to look for polyps or cancer. If you use a take home stool test, you will need to do it every year.

## ***Stool DNA Test***

Every cell in our bodies has something called DNA, which is like a blueprint that tells our cells what to do. Colon cancer cells have changes in their DNA that can be found by a new test. There is no special prep needed for this test. The test uses one entire bowel movement which is sent to a special lab. The lab will let your doctor know the test results.

If the test finds changes in your DNA, you will need a colonoscopy to look for cancer. If you use this test, it needs to be done every three years



# Start Today

## The Most Important Thing to Know About Colon Cancer Screening Tests

The most important thing is that ***any type of screening test is better than no screening.*** Your doctor or nurse can help you decide what type of test is best for you.

## When Should I Start Being Tested?

Everyone should start being tested for colon cancer by age 45. But people with a family history of colon cancer should start at a younger age. Talk to your doctor or nurse about when you should start being tested.

**If one of your parents or siblings had colon cancer or polyps, you may need to start screening at age 40, or even earlier. You should talk about this with your doctor.**



Tiwahenitawa Tokatakiya Wicozani  
Stay healthy for your family's future.

## Talk to Your Doctor About Getting Tested for Colorectal Cancer

Here are some questions to help you get started:

- At what age should I start getting tested for colorectal cancer?
- I've read that there's more than one test for colorectal cancer. Which one do you think is right for me?
- How is the test done? How do I prepare for it? What will happen to me, and how will it feel?
- What other tests for cancer should I have?

# Acknowledgments

## **The American Indian Cancer Foundation**

The American Indian Cancer Foundation (AICAF) has a vision of a world where cancer is no longer the leading cause of death for American Indian and Alaska Natives. AICAF strives to achieve this through hard work, culturally tailored community-based programs and policy change to provide access to the best prevention, early detection and treatment strategies where American Indian communities are free of the burdens of cancer.

AICAF is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization established to address the tremendous cancer inequities faced by American Indian and Alaska Native communities. AICAF's board members and employees have an array of experience serving the health needs of our people.

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## **American Cancer Society**

The American Cancer Society's mission is to save lives, celebrate lives, and lead the fight for a world without cancer. There are many different tests that can be used to check for colorectal cancer in people who don't have symptoms. Learn more about them here, then talk to a health care provider about the best colorectal cancer screening plan for you.

For cancer information, day-to-day help, and emotional support, call your American Cancer Society at **1.800.227.2345**. We're here when you need us—24 hours a day, 7 days a week.



cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345  
1.866.228.4327 TTY



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