

# Colorectal Cancer Screening

Guidelines toward making an informed decision

by Dr. Jeffrey Brock

**C**anadians have always had access to a vast repertoire of medical resources. In certain markets private clinics are now offering Canadians immediate access to newer and more complex diagnostic procedures.

Faced with confusing terminology and technology that is advancing at a rapid pace, many lay people are confused and unable to make an informed decision when the need arises.

According to the Canadian Association of Gastroenterology and the Canadian Digestive Health Foundation, most men and women should be screened for colorectal cancer from the age of fifty. Individuals who are asymptomatic but have a family history should begin screening at age forty, and in some case earlier. Screening may be indicated at the early age of ten in individuals with certain hereditary diseases.

With your physician, an appropriate screening plan will be established. The different tests that will make up the screening include:

**Fecal Occult Blood Testing:** This is a simple test to detect invisible traces of blood in the stool. It can be performed in a clinic, or by a general practitioner.

**Colonoscopy** is a technique to visualize the colon using a long, thin, flexible tube with a tiny video camera and light at the end. The gastroenterologist performing this test can use the colonoscope to pass instruments to immediately remove suspicious growths or take biopsies.

**Barium enema:** This is an X-ray examination of the entire colon and rectum. After cleansing of the colon, an enema of Barium Sulfate is administered. Special X-rays follow the flow of the barium in the colon and outline abnormalities. This test is performed by radiology technicians and interpreted by radiologists

**Flexible sigmoidoscopy** is an investigation with a shorter version of the colonoscope, used to screen the lower part of the colon. This test can be performed by trained physicians or nurses.

At this point in time, virtual colonoscopy has not yet become part of the Canadian practice guidelines.

**Virtual colonoscopy**, or CT colonography, takes multiple X-ray images that are processed by a computer to create a 2-D or 3-D image of the

colon. The preparation is similar to that for a regular colonoscopy; however, there is no need for sedation and only a small tube used to push air into the colon is inserted. This test is performed and read by a radiologist. If any abnormality is detected, then the patient must undergo a traditional colonoscopy to remove or biopsy the growth.

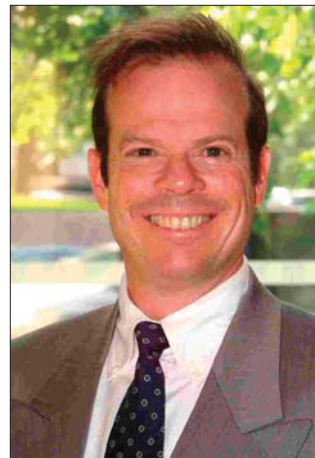
The U.S. National Cancer Institute, in an article reviewed in January 2005 concluded that, "Virtual colonoscopy is a promising screening tool for colorectal cancer." The American College of Radiology, at its recent annual meeting, adopted guidelines for virtual colonoscopy that will go into effect later this year.

One challenge facing this emerging technology is the fact that it is so new that there has not been enough clinical studies to support virtual colonoscopy's use. That does not mean it is not a useful imaging technique.

It is interesting to note that the Canadian Association of Gastroenterology guidelines give consideration to the availability of various resources in determining recommendations. Ideally, these recommendations would be made based on medical science alone.

The bottom line, if you are a screening candidate, is to speak to your physician to arrange testing without delay. Or you can contact the Colorectal Cancer Association of Canada at 888-318-9442 or through [www.ccac-accc.ca](http://www.ccac-accc.ca). □

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